FOLK TALES
OF KASHMIR

FOLK TALES OF INDIA : 21 VOLUMES

General Editor : P.C. Roy Chaudhury

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FOLK TALES
OF
KASHMIR

BANI ROY CHAUDHURY

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GENERAL EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

India has a legacy of rich and varied folklore. While researches in ancient and modern history have been directed in recent decades more to the succession of kings and political shifts, not much notice has been paid to the culture, complex traditions and social beliefs of the common people. The sociologists have also to pay a good deal of attention to the customs and beliefs of the people and to changes therein through the ages. They have rather neglected the study of folklore which is a reliable index to the background of the people. There has always been an easy mobility of the folklore through pilgrimages, *melas* and fairs. The wandering minstrels, *sadhus* and *fakirs* have also disseminated them. People of the North visiting the temples of the South and *vice versa* carry their folk tales, songs, riddles and proverbs with them and there is an inconspicuous integration. The *dharamsalas*, inns and the *chattis* (places of rest where the pilgrims rest and intermingle) work as the clearing house for the folk tales, traditional songs and riddles. That is why we find a somewhat common pattern in folk literature of different regions. The same type of folk tale will be found in Kashmir and in Kerala with a different regional complex. These stories were passed on from generation to generation by word of mouth before they came to be produced in writing.

Folklorists have different approaches to the appreciation of folklore. Max Mueller has interpreted the common pattern in folk literature as evidence of nature-myths. Sir L. Gomme thought that a historical approach is the best for the study of folklore. But Frazer would rather encourage a commonsense approach and to him old and popular folk literature is mutually interdependent and satisfies the basic curiosities and instincts of man. That folklore is a vital element in a living culture has been underlined in recent years by scholars like Malinowski and Radcliffe Brown.

It is unfortunate that the study of folklore in India is of very recent origin. This is all the more regrettable because the

Panchatantra stories which had their origin in Bihar had spread through various channels almost throughout the world. As late as in 1859, T. Benfey had held that there is an unmistakable stamp of Indian origin in most of the fairy tales of Europe. The same stories with different twists or complexes have come back to us through Grimm and Aesop and the retold stories are greedily swallowed by our children. That India has neglected a proper study of the beautiful motifs of our folk tales is seen in the fact that the two large volumes of dictionary of Folklore, Mythology and Legend published by Messrs Funk and Wagnalls and Company of New York have given a very inadequate reference to India.

What is the secret of the fascination of the folk tales that the old, young and the children are kept enthralled by their recitals? The same story is often repeated but does not lose its interest. The secret is the satisfaction that our basic curiosity finds in the folk tales. The folk tales through phantasies, make-beliefs and complacent understanding help the primitive man to satisfy his curiosity about the mysteries of the world and particularly the very many inexplicable phenomena of nature around him. We have an element of primitiveness in our mind in spite of the advancement of science around us. Even a scientist finds great delight in the fairy tales of the moon being attacked as the origin of the lunar eclipse. Through the folk tales man exercised his once-limited vision and somehow or the other we would like to retain that limited vision even when we have grown up. The advancement in science can never replace the folk tales. On the other hand, folk tales have helped the scientific curiosity in man. In spite of the scientific explanation as to why earthquakes take place, the old, young and the child would still be delighted to be told that the world rests on the hood of the great snake and when the snake is tired with the weight he shakes the hood and there is an earthquake. Among the Mundas, an aboriginal tribe in Bihar, there is a wonderful explanation of the Orion. The sword and belt of the Orion, the Mundas imagine, form their appropriate likeness to the plough and plough-share which the supreme *Sing Bonga* God first shaped in the heavens and then taught people on earth how to use the plough and the plough-share.

It is further in the Munda folk tale that while the *Sing Bonga* was shaping the plough and the plough-share with a chisel and a hammer he observed a dove hatching its eggs at a little distance. The *Sing Bonga* threw his hammer at the dove to bag the game. He missed his mark and the hammer went over the dove's head and hung on a tree. The hammer corresponds to the Pleiades which resemble a hammer. The Aldebaran is the dove and the other stars of Hyades are the eggs of the dove. Any illiterate Munda boy will unmistakably point out these star groups.

Weather and climate have their own stories and are often connected with particular stages of the crops. The wet season and the hottest month are intimately associated with the ripening of crops or the blossoming of trees or the frequency of dust storms and stories are woven round them. But nothing is more satisfying as a folk story than the explanation of the phases of the stars, the moon and the sun. A Munda would point out the milky way as the *Gai Hora* i.e., the path of the cows. The *Sing Bonga* God leads his cows every day along this path—the dusty path on the sky is due to the dust raised by the herd. The dust raised by the cows sends down the rains. A story of this type can never fail to sustain interest in spite of all the scientific explanation of the astral bodies.

The "why and wherefore" of the primitive mind tried to seek an answer in the surrounding animal and plant kingdom. Animals are grouped into different categories according to their intelligence and other habits. The fox is always sly while the cow is gentle. The lion and the tiger have a majestic air while the horse is swift, sleek and intelligent. The slow-going elephant does not forget its attendant nor does he forget a man that teases him. Monkeys are very near the mankind. The peacock is gay while the crow is shrewd. The tortoise is slow-going but sure-footed. The hare is swift but apt to laze on the road. The primitive mind is not unintelligent to decipher these inherent characteristics of the common animals he meets. Similarly, when he sees a large and shady peepal tree he naturally associates it with the abode of the sylvan god. The thick jungle with its trees and foliage is known to be frequented by thieves and dacoits. Any solitary hut in the thick of the forest must be

associated with someone unscrupulous or uncanny. These ideas are commonly woven into stories and through them the primitive mind seeks to satisfy the eternal why and how of the mind. Folk literature is often crude and even grotesque. The stories of the witches and the ogres come in this category. There is nothing to be surprised at that. They reflect the particular stage of the development of the human mind and also a projection of the beliefs and fads of the mind. Scientific accuracy should never be looked for in folk tales although folk tales are a very good reflex of the social development of a particular time.

The last source of the folk tales is human society itself. The elemental moorings that are at the root of human society are sought to be illustrated in folk tales. The day-to-day life of the common man finds its full depiction in the folk tales. Parental love, family happiness, children's adventurous habits, love and fear for the unknown, greed etc., are some of the usual themes of folk tales. The common man yearns for riches and comforts he cannot usually look for. He dreams of riches, princes, kingdoms etc., and finds a satisfaction in stories of fantasy. Men love gossip and scandal. Women cannot keep secrets, children will love their parents, a mother-in-law will always think the daughter-in-law needs to be told—these are some of the basic ideas that make up much of our daily life. The folk tales are woven round them and whether fantastic or with a moral undertone they only reflect the daily chores, tears and joys of the common man.

Unknowingly, the folklorists bring in the religious customs, beliefs, food habits, modes of dress, superstitions etc., and thereby leave a picture of the culture-complex of the region and its people. A tribal story does not picture a king riding a big white foaming horse followed by hundreds of other horsemen going for a *shikar*. In a tribal story the Raja will be found cutting grass and bringing back a stack of it for feeding his cows but a folk tale more current in urban areas will have large palaces, liveried-servants, ministers and courtiers in the king's court. All this only means that the time and the venue of the origin of the stories are widely different. It is here that the sociologists and the anthropologists come in useful. As life

is different in rural and urban areas or is chequered with goodness or badness of the world so is folk literature diversified, as it must be—being a replica of life.

These beautiful folk tales in India were almost on the point of disappearance when a few pioneers mostly consisting of foreign missionaries and European scholars, looked into them and made compilation in different parts of India. Our present run of grandmothers know very little of them. The professional story tellers who were very dearly sought after by the old and the young, not to speak of the children, have almost completely disappeared from India. The film industry and the film songs pose a definite threat to folklore.

Sterling Publishers are to be congratulated for launching the project of publishing a compilation of 21 volumes consisting of the folk tales of different regions. The work has been entrusted to specially selected writers who have an intimate knowledge of their region. The regional complex of the stories has been sought to be preserved as far as possible. The stories have an elemental involvement about them and they are such as are expected to appeal to the child and its parents. We expect the reader of the folk tales of the particular region to have a feeling after a study of the stories that he has enjoyed a whiff of air of that area. We want him to have an idea of how Kashmiri folks retire in wintry nights with the *kangri* under the folds of their clothes to enjoy gossips and how they enjoy their highly spiced meaty food. We want him to appreciate the splash of colour in the *sari* and the flowers that are a must in Tamil Nadu.

We want him to know the stories that are behind some of the famous temples in the South such as the Kanjeevaram temple. We want him to know the story regarding the construction of the famous Konark temple. We want him to enjoy the stories of the heroes of Gujarat, Punjab and Rajasthan in their particular roles. We want the reader to have an idea of the peace and quiet of a hut in the lap of the Kumaon hills. We want the reader to enjoy some of the folk tales of Bengal and Bihar that have found wings in other parts of India and to appreciate the village life with their *Alpanas* and *Bratas*. At the same time we want the reader to appreciate the customs and

manners of the Santals, Garos, and the other tribes inhabiting NEFA and Assam.

The Publishers in this ambitious project have created a miniature India in these volumes of folk tales of the different regions of India. The authors have to be thanked for their interest in the work. I am sure that they have enjoyed the assignment. It is hoped the books will be found useful and interesting to the public. I have no hesitation in saying that the stories of the different areas do make out a miniature India. It is hoped the reader will enjoy the stories and will come to know more of the region and its people.

P.C. Roy Chaudhury

PREFACE

Though basically there is not much difference in the folklore of the various regions, it remains true that the folklore of each state is greatly influenced by its natural environment and this gives it its peculiar distinguishing feature. And nowhere is this more true than in Kashmir which is a land of geographical contrasts. In the words of Dr Neve 'It is girt by mighty mountain ranges. These are the pearls which encircle the emerald valley.' This state is inhabited by people who are integrated though divided by cultural differences, by its gods, its traditions and its beliefs. All these are reflected in its folklore. Here we find the influence of Buddhism introduced by Asoka who is said to have founded the city of Srinagar; of Islam brought into the region by the kings and marauders from Persia; and of Hinduism, this being inevitable as it was ruled by Hindu kings from the remote past till well-nigh into the 14th century.

Kashmir has always been a rich store-house of folk-tales. Situated in the northern part of India, this beautiful valley is protected by high mountains and difficult passes. The inhabitants had thus, in the ancient past, to fall back on their own resources to amuse themselves and to keep themselves busy. Thus when winter came with its long snowy nights, the men retired early into their homes. As they warmed themselves by the *kangri*, an earthenware bowl of live coal, held in a frame of wicker-work and slipped under their voluminous gown, they wove stories beautiful and fantastic. These stories, handed down from generation to generation by local bards, reveal the flight of imagination of the village folk, of their acute common-sense and of their practical acceptance of things. And as these qualities are to be found in all simple folk the world over, the folk tales of Kashmir have had a wide public and have been avidly read.

Kashmir being a fair and beautiful land, had in the past always attracted the attention of foreign kings. Many kings

have ruled it but in spite of everything the Kashmiris have changed little. They have retained their culture and their talents which are exhibited in their arts and crafts. They have been too rooted in their traditions to allow any foreign influence to affect any substantial change. Thus we find that few states have changed less in the march of time than has Kashmir. But there have been times when its rich folklore has ceased to hold an important place due to foreign subjugation. For the last two decades not only has the interest in them been revived but they have created an unquestionable niche for themselves amongst the celebrated folklores of the country. One of the major sources of the folk tales has been the *Kathasaritsagar* written by Somadeva for one of the queens of Kashmir. That they will claim a great deal of attention and will hold the interest of the public can be justifiably expected.

Bani Roy Chaudhury

FOLK TALES OF INDIA SERIES: 21 VOLUMES

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FOLK TALES
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KASHMIR

1

THE RICH MERCHANT

THERE was once a rich merchant. He lived in a large and spacious house in Srinagar. In spring, the earthen roof, resting on layers of birchbark was bright with green herbiage and colourful flowers. About this time ,of the year, his almond gardens also came into bloom. These looked most pretty with their white blossoms with a suggestion of pink here and there. At the back of the house stood the vegetable garden. Nearby, stood the wooden granary in which grain for the whole year was stocked A stone garden wall, on which grew flowers of bright hues, enclosed the property.

It is expected that a person living in such pleasant surroundings should have had a pleasant disposition. But the merchant was a mean-natured man and the men to suffer from his meanness were the servants. The condition which he laid down when he employed them, was shocking. to say the least. The condition was that, if in the course of service, the servant lost his temper, the merchant would cut off his nose. Yet, in spite of this unusual and cruel condition, his house was never without a retinue of servants, for the wages offered were high enough to tempt a needy man; but ere long, his servants invariably left his service with noseless faces.

Once it so happened that a poor farmer came to

town looking for work. His saffron fields had failed to yield any flowers and the bulbs had withered and died. He had come to town with the hope of earning enough to tide him over the bad times. As fate would have it, he came to the house of the merchant just at that very moment when the latter had cut off the nose of a servant and was in the act of throwing him out. The poor farmer, shocked out of his wits by all that he saw, was wondering whether he had done the correct thing in seeking the service of the merchant, when the latter ordered him to come in. The merchant approved of the man but made the condition of service clear to him. The man had never heard the like of it before but in the hour of his need he accepted the offer.

The days passed satisfactorily but the farmer constantly worried about his home, wife and children. He missed them very much. Whilst he thus passed his days in misery, the condition of service completely slipped from his memory. One day—and how he cursed the day—he spoke sharply to his master. The merchant did not waste a moment on explanations. He sliced off the servant's nose.

The poor farmer could hardly believe his plight. A noseless face ! What would the village folk say ? As he trudged homewards he met a friend. The latter had to rub his eyes twice and pinch himself hard before he could believe what he saw. "Dear friend," he exclaimed, "what has happened to your nose ?"

The farmer related the sad story. The injustice of it left the friend seething with anger. "I will enter the service of that man and teach him a lesson for life," he said.

No sooner said than done. He packed his things and marched off to the merchant's house. The merchant was happy that he could secure a replacement in such a short span of time. He did not

know that this time he was dealing with a *Gabih buthih ramahhun*, or a wolf in sheep's clothing. When the man heard of the condition of work, he said, "I agree to the condition, but let it apply to the master as well. That will make it a fair deal. The moment the master loses his temper or abuses me, I shall have the right to cut off his nose."

The merchant was at first too surprised for words. No other servant had dared set forth such a condition before. Then he thought it over and it seemed fair enough. So he agreed to the condition and the man entered his service.

Months passed by without either the master or the servant losing control over his temper. They were on their best behaviour in spite of the fact that each tried to provoke the other. Once the merchant's wife said, "Watch over the *kabargah* while it is cooking. We are going out for a while." The *kabargah* is a choice meat dish. The servant sat by the fire and watched the *kabargah* cook. Soon the smell of burnt meat filled the air. The meat turned brown and then black. The servant watched on without moving a muscle. When the merchant's wife returned, she found only the charred pieces of meat in a red-hot utensil. The servant, as obedient as ever, sat watching over it.

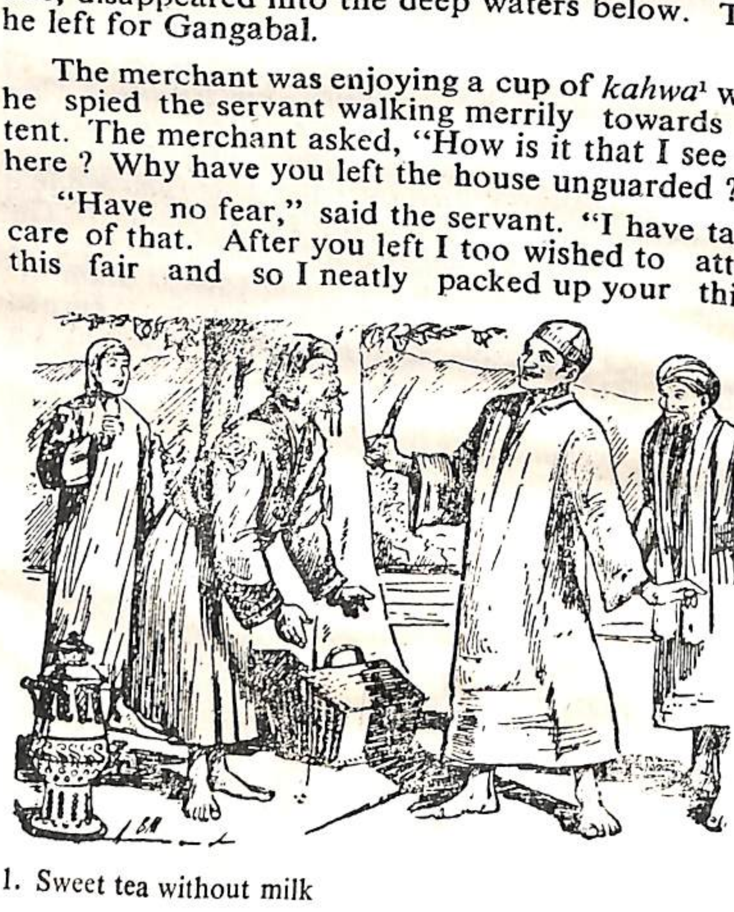
Such incidents occurred occasionally without any outburst of temper on either side. The month of August approached and the merchant made preparations to attend the fair held on the banks of the mountain lake of Gangabal. This is a celebrated place of pilgrimage. A great festival is held annually in the month of August and is attended by thousands of Hindus from all parts of Kashmir.

Before leaving, the merchant called the servant and said to him, "See that no harm comes to the house and to the things that are in it."

A few days after the merchant had left, the servant, a devout Hindu, also felt an urge to attend the *mela*. What was he to do ? You can be sure that it did not take him long to think of a way out. He had large bags stitched. Into these bags he put all the articles of the house, filled them with some heavy stones and then stitched up the bags. These he loaded in the *kiltas* or large baskets strapped to the back of the coolies and led them to the Dal lake. Here he had the bags lowered into the water. He watched with satisfaction as the bags, one by one, disappeared into the deep waters below. Then he left for Gangabal.

The merchant was enjoying a cup of *kahwa*[1] when he spied the servant walking merrily towards his tent. The merchant asked, "How is it that I see you here ? Why have you left the house unguarded ?"

"Have no fear," said the servant. "I have taken care of that. After you left I too wished to attend this fair and so I neatly packed up your things



1. Sweet tea without milk

including the furniture in big bags, filled them up with stones to make them heavy and dumped these in the Dal lake. No one will even dream of looking for them there and so your things are perfectly safe."

The merchant was simply choking with rage at these words. His face grew mottled and red. He raised his hand and slapped the servant with all his might. Though it was a stinging blow the servant gave a loud laugh of triumph. "At last", he said triumphantly, "you have lost your temper and now I can fulfil the condition of our contract and thus avenge the wrong you did to my friend." Saying this, he caught hold of the merchant, who realised too late the predicament he had placed himself in. The servant whipped out a razor which he always carried with him not knowing when the need for it may arise. *Tsarin katan na sud*,—there is no profit in many words, so with an expert swish, he sliced off the merchant's nose and made himself scarce.

2

THE MONSTER

IT was the beginning of winter and a light snowfall had whitened the lush green valley of Kashmir. People everywhere found that they had nothing to do. For the next four months snow would make agriculture impossible and for the majority who were farmers, this would mean idleness. So they all lighted their *kangris*[1], slid these under their voluminous gowns and sat down in groups to exchange news and to gossip. In Krimchi, sat one such group. The prospect of the cold months ahead dampened their spirits and so talk was not flowing. They sat huddled, sadly lacking a story or scandal that would enliven them up a bit. They talked occasionally when the silence became too heavy. They had just fallen into complete silence, not knowing what to talk about, when a newcomer joined them. After sharing the *hookah*[2] of friendship with him, they asked him for news as he had just returned from Udhanpur. There was a look of satisfaction on the man's face for, as he said, he had sold his merchandise there at a profitable price, "though not without haggling," he assured them confidently.

"What is the news of Udhanpur ?" asked one, happy to have found some topic of conversation.

1. An earthen bowl containing live coal, held in a frame of wicker-work, which serves as a heater.

2. A smoking apparatus.

"Heard anything new ?" asked another.

The newcomer looked from one to the other and his whole expression changed as he whispered, "Brothers, a terrible calamity has overtaken its people." He paused for a while, waiting for the remark to have its desired effect on his audience.

"Calamity ?" they chorused, full of interest.

"Aye, calamity, sirs, calamity of the most dreadful sort. A mysterious monster has visited it and terrified the people."

"What sort of monster is it ?" they asked.

"Now that is difficult to say, for as I have already said, it is a mysterious one. No one has seen it but it has devoured a handful of men, torn of the limbs of about half a dozen and has blinded others. It moves about in the stillness of the night and disappears before anyone can collect his wits and call for help."

Forgotten was the cold day as the villagers scrambled to their feet and dispersed hurriedly to spread the news through the village. Soon everyone was talking of the mysterious monster and its terrible doings. "Thank God, our village is safe," they said.

To the east of Krimchi, there is a cluster of hamlets called Mansar. In the evening of the same day a group of villagers was chatting and smoking. Said one to the others, "Did you hear the latest news from Krimchi ?"

"What is it ?" asked the others.

"I am told that a frightful monster has visited it and has left behind a bloody trail. This very morning it snatched away babies from their mothers' laps and blinded the men who tried to chase it."

"What does it look like ?" they asked in wonder.

"Now that you ask, it is something no one has been able to say for no one has ever seen it. It is most cunning and quick in its bloody doings."

In Udhanpur, the place first said to have been visited by the monster, the scene is once again the market place, for it is here that one hears the day's gossip. It is market day and a big crowd has collected. As they talk of sundry things, one says, "Did you hear of the terrible havoc at Krimchi and Mansar ?"

"Why, whatever is the matter?" asked the crowd.

"Oh, it is said that a terrible monster has visited the villages and has delimbed many. The people are afraid to stir out of their houses even in the day. Why, only yesterday my uncle's friend who lives in Krimchi, found his ears sliced off when he was sleeping in his room. And in Mansar, a woman found her right hand cut off as she was drawing water from the well."

"Is it not queer that no one has seen the monster nor has anyone seen a victim even though it is said to be creating such widespread havoc ?"

"Oh that," replied the first speaker with the attitude of one who knows everything, "is not at all queer. The monster is too cunning and quick for ordinary men. And as regards the victims, one must go to the villages to believe."

The crowd dispersed and soon evening set in. About midnight a piercing cry broke through the night. The men scrambled out of their beds, shouting, "The monster! the monster! it's the monster!" The house from where the cry had been heard was soon thronging with excited spectators. A woman was screaming hysterically as she clutched her right ear. "Oh, the monster nearly sliced off my ear" she stammered in-between her screams.

With great difficulty she calmed down. A police official who had come to make inquiries, asked, "Can you please tell me as to what exactly happened ?"

The very question seemed to bring back the nightmare and throw her into hysterics. She said, "I was asleep. Just when I was about to turn over my side, I felt my ear being pulled. I jerked my head and found my ear-ring torn away from my bleeding ear. Before my ear itself could be torn away, I cried out for help."

The police official expressed his desire to be taken to where she slept. There, lying entangled in the threads of the bed-cover he saw the offending ear-ring. He could not suppress a smile when he retrieved it and returned it to its owner. He said, "It was no monster but the thread of the bed-cover which had pulled away your ear-ring." But the people remained convinced that it had been the monster who had tried to pull it away. The priests advised, "Offer prayers to the gods and the monster will disappear."

Prayers were held in all the temples and mosques and after that no one ever heard of the monster again. Thus was laid to rest the ghost of a winter day's gossip.

3

HIMAL AND NAGRAI

LONG ago there dwelt a poor Kashmiri brahmin in Anantnag, a place sacred to the Hindus, where the *nag*, or snake, is worshipped. That he was a poor man, he was not allowed to forget, for his wife was forever nagging him about it. One day his wife said to him, "There is no food in the house not even a handful of grain. Get out of the house with this bag. Beg, borrow or steal, but do not return to the house empty-handed. Now go."

The brahmin took the bag and left the house with no idea in the least as to where he would get grain to fill the bag. After walking for some time, he came to one of the sacred pools in Anantnag. He was weary and so he put down the bag and lay down to rest. Soon he fell fast asleep. When he awoke and was about to pick up the bag, he saw something wriggling inside it. He knew that it was a snake that had got into it. He picked up the bag gingerly, tied its mouth and started walking homewards. A brilliant idea had struck him. He would give the bag to his wife, who thinking that there was grain in it, would naturally open it. The snake would of course bite her and that would be the end of her. With these thoughts racing through his mind, the brahmin quickened his steps. On reaching home, he cried, "See what I have brought."

His wife took the bag from him. She gave a



loud piercing scream when a snake hissed out of it. But the very next moment a miracle took place. Ere the snake fell to the ground, it changed itself into a lovely baby boy. The little one said, "Dear people, accept me as your child and you shall never regret it."

With a cry of joy the brahmin's wife picked him up for she was childless and had often yearned for a child. The brahmin too was happy at this lucky turn of events. They named the boy Nagrai, which means the king of snakes.

The boy grew into a sturdy and handsome young lad. One day he quickly slipped out of the house and went to where the palace was. At the southern end of the palace, Nagrai changed himself into a snake and slipped in through a crack in the palace walls. He wriggled his way to the royal bathing pool and after a most refreshing bath, he glided out of the palace wall. Here he once again changed himself into a young lad and returned home. He

did this a number of times. One day as he was enjoying his bath in the royal bathing pool, as Nagrai and not as a snake, the princess Himal saw him from her window. She was much surprised. How had the handsome youth entered the palace, she asked herself. She sent her maid to follow him and to find out who he was. The maid soon returned with the news that he was Nagrai, the son of a poor brahmin. The princess made up her mind to marry him and only him, and this she told her parents. The king and queen were shocked, to say the least. Their daughter, the beautiful princess to marry a poor brahmin boy! What would the world say? What would the people of their kingdom say? But the princess was adamant and no coaxing of her royal parents could make her change her mind. At last they reluctantly agreed to the marriage as their daughter was very dear to them. When the king called the brahmin and put forward the marriage proposal, the brahmin felt that he had never come nearer to fainting in his life.

"Sire, excuse me," he said, "but how can that be? I am a poor subject of yours. How can I even dare imagine that the princess will become my daughter-in-law?"

"You have rightly spoken," said the sad king, "but my daughter wishes it so and so it shall be. Make preparations for the wedding."

Preparations were made and the marriage day dawned. The king was worried and so was the brahmin. Imagine a poor bridal procession walking into the palace! But Nagrai said to his father, "Dear father, do not worry. We will not cut a sorry figure. Please drop this piece of birch-bark into the sacred pool where you first found me. It carries a message."

The brahmin did as told and returned home.

He had to pinch himself before he could believe what he saw. His humble little thatched hut was no more. In its place stood a glittering palace. Uniformed soldiers moved to and fro and caparisoned elephants formed an impressive line. Feasting was in progress. Nagrai emerged from the palace in a princely costume. It all appeared like a dream to the brahmin.

Himal and Nagrai were married and they moved to a new palace built for them. Here they lived in great happiness but alas, their happiness was to prove short-lived.

As we already know, Nagrai was a snake before he changed himself into a human being. He was actually the king of snakes and had lived in his palace under the waters of the sacred pool with his snake queens. His snake-wives were getting impatient at the continued absence of their husband. They came to know through their spies that he had married a princess and was living in great splendour. This did not please them at all. One of them emerged from the pool, changed herself into a seller of silverware and came to the palace selling her wares. Himal was attracted by the bright pieces in her basket and bought them all. Among the things was the favourite cup of Nagrai, which the snake-wife had deliberately put in. When Nagrai returned, Himal showed him the things she had bought. As soon as Nagrai saw the cup, he knew that it was the work of his snake-wives. He warned her never again to buy wares from such sellers.

Another wife, dressed as a gypsy, came to the palace the next day. She asked Himal, "Does Nagrai, my husband, live here ?"

"Nagrai, your husband ? I am afraid you have made a mistake. My husband Nagrai is a brahmin and not a low caste like you."

"O, he is just fooling you," said the gypsy. "If you think he is a brahmin then ask him to stand in the water of sacred pool on the outskirts of the city and take the oath that he is really a brahmin."

The seed of suspicion had been sown and though Himal was not willing to believe her words, she wanted to be sure. What if the woman had spoken correctly? When Nagrai returned, she questioned him. Nagrai was annoyed. He knew the game his snake-wives were at and said impatiently, "Why must you listen to such talk? Forget it."

Now Himal became more adamant than ever that nothing but an oath taken in the sacred pool would satisfy her. To satisfy her, Nagrai went to the pool but the moment he stepped into it, his snake-wives pulled him down. He appeared to the surface no more. Himal was full of sorrow and sat sobbing for a long time over her loss. Himal now spent her time in prayers and in giving alms to the poor. One day as she was giving alms, a hermit came to her. He told her a tale that filled her with hope. He said, "Whilst I was passing by a certain pool, I saw a handsome man in a princely dress, emerge out of the pool. In his hand he carried a plate of food. He kept this under a tree and said, 'Dear Himal, this is for you."

Himal was sure that the man was no other than Nagrai himself. She went to the pool and waited patiently. It was nearly midnight when he emerged from the pool. Himal fell at Nagrai's feet when she saw him. "Take me back with you," she sobbed. Nagrai was afraid that his serpent-wives would kill her if he took her to his palace under the pool, but Himal refused to be parted from him. At last Nagrai changed her into a glittering diamond and carried her back thus. The snake-wives at once became suspicious. They inquired, "How is it that we smell human flesh?"

Nagrai had to change Himal into her human form. After much persuasion the snake-wives agreed to let her stay. They of course tortured her as much as they could when Nagrai was not near. They made her do all the hard chores and gave her little to eat. But Himal never complained. She was content to be near Nagrai. One day she had just boiled a pan of milk when the children of the snake-wives came clamouring for it. They took tumblers of the milk and gulped it down. The hot milk burned their throats and they all died. The snake-wives were wild with rage. They came hissing at Himal and stung her. She died on the spot.

Nagrai was grief-stricken when he saw the dead body of Himal. He embalmed it and carried it back to dry land. There he kept it carefully under a shady *chenar* tree. Everyday he would visit the place and shed tears in memory of his dear wife.

One day, a hermit happened to pass by. He was touched to see the dead body of such a beautiful girl. He crushed some herbs and poured the juice into her mouth. Life came back to Himal. He then took her to his hermitage.

Nagrai as usual came up. His surprise was great and his grief was greater when he found that Himal's body had been taken away. He sent forth his spies to locate her. He was informed that she was living in a hermitage. Nagrai, as a snake, slithered there. In one of the rooms he found Himal fast asleep. Not willing to disturb her, he curled himself at her side and lay down quietly. As ill-luck would have it, the son of the hermit entered the room. He was horrified to see a large snake near the sleeping girl and taking a large stick he killed it. The noise awoke Himal. When she saw the dead snake beside her, she cried out, "O, what have you done! You have killed my husband."

The dead snake was cremated and Himal threw herself into the flames and died. This made the hermit very sad. Not only had Himal led a sad life but she had died whilst she had been under his care. As he brooded over this, a voice spoke to him. It said, "Throw the ashes of Himal and Nagrai into the sacred pool and they will live once again." The hermit did as told and out of the pool emerged Himal and Nagrai in their human form. They lived happily ever after.

4

THE COIN

COINS are indeed a common thing. Apart from their purchasing power they excite no particular interest, but there is an interesting story how a coin, with the figurehead of a king, created a sensation in a small village by the banks of the Wular lake.

The village lay at the foot of the hills partly screened by high mountains. With these on one side and with the lake, which changed itself into a sea of rolling waves when the winds blew, on the other, the village had rarely seen strangers; neither had its people ventured out. They tilled the land and it yielded enough to meet all their meagre needs. There was a rich growth of walnut, apple and apricot trees and the fields yielded the dearest grain of the Kashmiris—rice. Each hut had a garden plot well stocked with vegetables. These simple folk believed in the well-known saying of their forefathers, *Tasari chu kand thari peth karar*, the bird is content when it is sitting on its own branch.

One day into this village there came a stranger. He brought with him a small round metal object which was beautifully decorated with the figurehead of a king. It shone and glistened in the sun. It was a silver rupee. The villagers had never seen the like of it before, for money was unknown to them. The days of barter still held good here. They bought and sold in kind. Payments were usually made in

terms of *khirwars*, the ass-loads of cereals.

The news of the presence of the coin spread like wild fire in the village. Soon the villagers, eager and excited, came to have a look at it. What would they do with it, they asked each other in round-eyed wonder. A hurried meeting of the village elders was called. They sat solemn-faced in a circle and gave deep thought to the matter. At last the leader of the group said, 'There is only one thing that we can do with the coin. That it is a rare and precious one has been acknowledged by everyone present. This being so, we should make presentation of it to the king.'

The idea was accepted and the elders heaved a sigh of relief. Soon another and graver problem stared them in the face—where would they keep the coin till it left on its important journey to the capital? No one was willing to risk keeping the coin with him. Finally it was decided that four of the elders would by turns keep watch over the coin through the night. A *diya*, an oil-lamp, was lit and the coin was reverently placed on a cushioned seat. A red umbrella was held over it. Thus passed the night.

Ere dawn could break through, the village was agog with excitement. Preparations for the journey of the coin had begun. A beautiful *doli* or palanquin of walnut wood was made. Delicately carved grape vines adorned it. A cushion of red Kashmiri silk was placed in it. Then in the presence of the villagers the coin was placed on the cushion. The curtains were drawn to shield it from public gaze. Four villagers carefully placed the *doli* to their shoulders and to the songs of the village maidens, carried it as solemnly as though they were carrying a sacred relic. A colourfullly decorated boat was awaiting them on the banks. The palanquin-bearers placed their precious charge on its seat. Flowers were showered

and with a final push, it started on its journey.

The lake was unusually calm that day and its surface looked like a shimmering sheet of molten silver. The boat sailed away, tracing a dark line behind it. On the opposite bank the men got out of the boat, hoisted the *doli* once more to their shoulders and walked the rest of the way to the capital. The passers-by looked in questioning curiosity at the colourful procession, for the villagers were dressed in their best festive clothes. When the people inquired what they carried in the curtained *doli*, they declared, 'A present for our king'. What it was, they refused to disclose.

At last they reached the palace gates. The leader cleared his throat and announced to the palace-guard, 'We crave permission to place our humble present at the feet of the king.' The king gave orders for the village folk to be received into the palace. The pride of the villagers swelled like a balloon.



They were actually inside the palace and were being treated like royal guests !

Soon the king ordered them to his presence. The *doli* was solemnly set before him and the villagers bowed down to touch his feet. Then their leader spoke thus, 'We, your humble servants, have been entrusted with a most sacred task. Prompted by our deep respect and loyalty we bear a present for you from our village. Permit us to place it at your feet.'

The permission being granted, the man walked up to the *doli* and with a quick flick removed its curtain. He then put in his hand to take out the coin. The court waited in curious silence. As the man's hand fumbled inside the *doli*, first a look of surprise, then a look of consternation and then a look of fear came into his face. He went into hurried conference with his men. Once again his hand shot into the *doli*. He shook his head, his eyes now large with fear. What would happen now ? The king was getting impatient and had put up a royal hand to stifle a yawn. The courtiers were shifting in their seats The village folk feared the worst penalty. Their leader fell at the feet of the king and the others promptly followed suit. In a choking voice he said, 'Sire, deal with us as in your clemency you think fit. We have lost the present.'

'What, lost the present ?' asked the courtiers in anger and disbelief "How dare you come to the presence of the king and try to fool him ?" Turning to the king, they chorused in one voice, 'Death, your majesty, death is the only penalty for persons like these.'

But the king would not hear of it. He knew that the men before him were too simple to dare such a trick. He ordered them to be locked up for the night. The villagers were near to tears when they

heard the palace-guard click the lock of their cell. What a misfortune !

It was winter and the prison cell was very cold. The king sent them a box of matches to light their *kangris*. He did this to test whether they were really as simple as they looked. The villagers took the box of matches and with blank stares turned it over in their hands. They had never seen one before let alone used one. Fire in their village was never allowed to die out. A faggot or two was always kept burning in every home. What use then would they have of matches ? As they could not light their *kangris*, they passed the night benumbed with cold. The chattering of teeth broke the stillness of the night.

The next morning, the king called them to his presence. He was convinced that he had judged them correctly. He now wanted to know how they had come to lose the present. In a voice trembling with fear, the leader of the group related, word by word, all that had taken place. 'The present must have fallen off on the way', he concluded.

What a hearty laugh the king had when he heard this. He was so amused and touched by their simplicity that he heaped them with presents. The village elders were filled with relief and joy. Donning expensive *pherans*, the long coats, they returned to their village in right royal style. The story of their adventure spread far and wide and is spoken of even now by the village folk of Kashmir.

5

THE CAPTAIN OF THIEVES

THE Kashmiri pandit was deeply worried. His one and only daughter had passed the marriageable age and yet he had not succeeded in getting her married. This was not because there was any dearth of bridegrooms. On the contrary proposals for her hand had steadily come in, for she was, in the tradition of all Kashmiri girls, fair and pretty. The embarrassing fact was that the pandit did not have the money to marry his daughter off. He belonged to one of those unfortunate families who have had rich and extravagant ancestors who bequeath nothing to posterity but the curse of the pomp and show of their lavishness. The pandit's extravagant forefathers had always maintained a big palatial home with a long retinue of servants. There were also large *marals*[1] of paddy land. Important festivals like the Shivaratri had always been celebrated on a grand scale and on the New Year's day there had always been new clothes for every inmate of the house. The basement of the ancestral home was said to be full of treasure-laden chests.

But in the days of the pandit things were quite different. Money had been gradually drained from his strong box whilst his income had been reduced to nothing. It was true that he owned large acres of paddy land but competition, of late, had been so high that he had been forced to leave his field

1 A measure of land.

fallow. But whatever his financial condition, he had not dared to reduce the pomp and show his forefathers had maintained for fear of the ridicule of the neighbours. Most of all he feared the ridicule of Sunder, once a friend but who now had become worse than an enemy. How had such a thing come to pass ? Once Sunder had asked for the loan of a large sum of money. The pandit had tried to explain his inability in the best possible way but Sunder had taken it as an insult. Forgotten were all the years of friendship as he vowed to avenge the insult. From thence on he never spared any chance of belittling the pandit. The latter thus kept well out of his way.

This did not deter Sunder. He wished to see the pandit's position further degraded. How could this be done ? Whilst he thought over this, a servant of his came to his aid. He said, 'Master, I know the captain of the thieves. Employ him to rob the pandit clean. That will be the end of the pandit and of his big ancestral home.'

The captain of thieves was accordingly employed. He was known throughout the land for his cunning and daring. People feared the very mention of his name.

The pandit was of course not aware of this mean plot. One night as he lay down to sleep, his wife said, 'It is time you thought of your daughter's wedding. What is the reason for postponing it every year ?'

The pandit realised that the time had come to reveal to his wife how poor they really were. He replied, 'Rightly have you asked why I am not getting our daughter married. The truth, dear wife, is that I do not have money for the purpose. For the past few years I have been spending far above my means to keep up the dignity of the family name. The position now is that I see no way of getting or

earning enough to run the household. How then can I provide for a daughter's marriage ?'

The wife could also see no way out and she cried out, 'Oh whatever will happen! O, that I had lived to see the day when poverty would be our lot!'

She wept bitterly. The pandit was deeply moved and before he could check himself, he was weeping along with his wife. He felt as though his heart would break.

This pathetic scene, which had taken place in the privacy of the bed-room, had been witnessed by an outsider. He was the captain of the thieves, who had sneaked into the house with the intention of committing the theft that night. He was shocked at all that he had heard. He had been tempted by Sunder to rob the pandit under the belief that the ancestral home of the victim was full of treasure. He realised now that he had been falsely led. Anger flared up within him. He finally thought out a way by which he could make his journey worthwhile. Waiting patiently till the pandit and his wife were fast asleep, he slipped out of the house.

The next day Sunder waited eagerly for the captain of the thieves to report of the theft at the pandit's house. The man not only failed to turn up, but, to his horror, Sunder found that he had been robbed of every piece of jewellery and gold and silver coins in the house.

The next morning when the pandit's wife awoke, she was surprised to see a bag lying by the side of her pillow. It had definitely not been there the night before. On opening it she found a heap of gold and silver coins. Over these was a slip of paper on which was scrawled, 'The captain of thieves leaves behind a small present for your daughter's wedding.'

6

THE PEARLS

BHOLANATH, a Kashmiri farmer, was in misery. His rice field lay parched and the rich fruit trees had dried up. A severe drought had hit the fair valley of Kashmir and there was no food anywhere. People begged from door to door. Vultures crowded the skies. The *Kashmir-Zannat puzir* or the Kashmir equal to paradise, became a land of the hungry and the dead. Bholanath peeped into his wooden granary. It was empty. He picked up a bag and left the house wondering where he would get grain to fill it up. Who would give him even a handful of grain when there was hardly any.

On the way he met a hermit. Bholanath was indeed looking so miserable that the hermit asked, 'Son, is there anything I can do for you?'

Bholanath spoke of his hopeless state to the hermit and asked expectantly, 'Sir, can you help me in any way?'

The hermit replied, 'In my hut, which is in the forest bordering the village, lives my daughter. Go to her. She will solve all your problems.'

With great hope in his heart, Bholanath went to her. When she heard his story, she started weeping. Large drops fell from her eyes, but as they fell to the ground, they were changed into priceless pearls. When a heap had collected she gave them to him and said, 'Sell these pearls to buy food.'

Bholanath thanked her profusely and hurried off

to the market but when he tried to sell the pearls, he found that no one was willing to buy them. All the people asked him the same question, 'Where have you got such priceless pearls from ?' They looked knowingly at one another and asked, 'Till yesterday you were a poor man. From where did you suddenly get all this treasure ?' To make matters worse they led him to the king and said, 'Sir, the man has suddenly acquired a big treasure of pearls. It is for you to judge from where he got them.'

The king questioned him and Bholanath told him the whole story. The king found it difficult to believe it. He said, 'Take me to the girl to see whether her tear drops really change into pearls such as these.'

Bholanath and the king went to the hermit's hut. When the girl heard of the reason of their visit, she refused to come out to meet the king. Instead she wept and when her tears changed into pearls, she sent them to the king. The king, greatly impressed, asked the hermit for his daughter's hand in marriage. The hermit, happy that his daughter would become the queen of Kashmir, gave his consent. Arrangements for the wedding were made and the king and the hermit's daughter were married in the hermit's hut. The next day, the king left for his capital with his bride.

The bridal procession went along the Jhelum river and entered a thick forest. Darkness had set in and so the royal party camped for the night. At midnight, when everyone was asleep, the personal maid of the bride gagged and blinded her, took off her ornaments and clothes and locked her up in a wooden box. She bribed some men to throw this into the river. Then she dressed her own daughter in the bride's clothes and ornaments and put her in the bride's place.

The wooden box went floating along, dashing

against stones and rocks. It was a sturdy one and no harm came to it. A wood-cutter who had come to the forest to cut wood, saw it floating. He became curious and dragged it ashore. When he opened it he was aghast to see a beautiful girl inside it. She was unconscious. He gently carried her to his hut. It was when she regained consciousness that he discovered that she was blind. He was a childless man and he took good care of the girl. He soon nursed her back to health. He was pleasantly surprised to find that whenever she wept, her tears changed into big glistening pearls. She would collect these and give them to him saying, 'Father, sell these and buy things for the house.' She was indeed very grateful to this man who had not only saved her from sure death but who had also looked after her as though she had been his own child.

By and by, the wood-cutter became a rich man. He left the wooden hut in the forest and moved into a large rambling house. Fruit trees surrounded it and in season, they were a blaze of the brightest colours. There was also a vegetable garden and two wooden granaries, which were well-stocked with grain. The vegetable garden outgrew its fences and spilled itself on the wayside. The wood-cutter's *pheran*[1] and *paijamas*[2] were now made of the finest cloth of the land and he donned a brightly embroidered cap. Of the girl, he took the greatest care. He bought for her beautifully embroidered clothes. For her ears, he bought large ear-rings studded with precious pearls and a matching necklace for her neck. He served her with the most delicious and nutritious food and soon her glowing health made her look more beautiful than ever. But there were times when she was sad and would sulk and brood. This would make the wood-cutter sad and he would say, 'Daughter, you have never told me as to how you

1. Long coat.
2. Long pants.

happened to get inside the wooden box. Who is responsible for the evil deed? Is there no way of getting back your eyesight ?'

'Oh, father, how many questions you ask. I cannot answer all of them. All I can say is that my eyesight can be restored.'

'Tell me how this can be done and I will spare no pains to do as you say.'

'Take a handful of pearls and go to the palace. Bribe one of the queen's maids to get for you the eyes of the queen's personal maid. If I wear those eyes, I will be able to see once again.'

The wood-cutter did as told. One of the royal maids, her eyes round with wonder at so much wealth, agreed to do the job. When the maid was asleep, she expertly took out her eyes and gave them to the wood-cutter, whilst the bag of pearls she slipped into her pocket. The wood-cutter ran home and gave the eyes to the blind girl. She put them on and cried, 'Father, I can see everything.'

The wood-cutter soon became a millionaire and the news reached the ears of the king. He summoned the wood-cutter and asked, 'From where did you, an ordinary wood-cutter, get so much wealth?

At first the wood-cutter was reluctant to say anything but when the king threatened to punish him if he did not speak the truth, he told him the sad story of the blind girl. The king was quite disturbed to hear that her tears turned into pearls whenever she wept. His queen, who in reality was the maid's daughter, had never given him a single pearl. The king ordered the wood-cutter to bring the girl to his presence. She told him her whole story. The king was happy to get back his bride and he declared a week's holiday to celebrate it. The maid and her daughter were given the punishment they deserved. They were hanged.

7

THE MAGIC CUP

KAILASH was a poor Kashmiri. He was so poor that there were times when there was no grain in the house and he and his wife had to go hungry. Though this had made him thin and weak, he did not grumble. But when he saw his wife working herself to the bone on a starving stomach, his anger welled up. One day he left the house in one of these moods. He walked away fast and unseeing. Soon the village lay behind him and he entered the forest that bordered the village on its northern side. He sat down under a large tree and the vision of his wife's pinched face came back to him. He cried out aloud, 'Oh God, why did you make me so poor that I am unable to give a full meal to my wife. How much longer must I see her suffering ? She offers prayers to you daily and never complains of her hard lot. Can you not take some pity and relieve her suffering ?'

He suddenly heard footsteps and looked up to see who it was He saw an old hermit coming his way. Kailash hung down his head in despair and hopelessness. The hermit stopped in front of him. Kailash looked up surprised. The hermit asked, Son, what ails you?'

'Sir, it is something which none can help.'

'All the same, what harm is there in telling ?'

'I am a poor man,' said Kailash, 'So poor, sir, that not only I, but my wife too, is unable to afford even one square meal a day. We are starved and today when I saw the pinched face of my wife, I could not bear it. But then I do not see any way out of this misery.'

'Is that so ?' asked the hermit as he fumbled into the bag that hung from his shoulder. From it he took out a brass cup. Giving it to Kailash, he said, 'Take this cup. It is a magic one. It will provide whatever food you wish for.'

Kailash could hardly believe the hermit's words. Unbelievingly he took the cup and wished for his favourite meat dish, *goshtaba*. Of course, he also wished for rice. The next moment the food was before him in a shining plate. The *goshtaba* cooked in curd was delicious and the rice was long-grained and as fluffy as one could wish for. He profusely thanked the hermit and hungrily ate the food. How content and satiated he felt! Before the hermit departed, he said, 'Keep the cup carefully.'

Kailash hurried back home. On the way, as he was passing by a miserable looking hut, he heard the voices of two children crying for food. The mother was trying to calm them saying, 'I will get some food for you tomorrow. Go to sleep now. The children protested louder than ever. Kailash stepped in and said, 'Kids, come here and I will give you the best meal of your life.'

The children excitedly clamoured up to him. Kailash took the cup in his hand and wished for four plates of food. It was a joy to see the look of happiness on the faces of the hungry children as they ate as fast as they could. As Kailash was looking on, the woman, who had greedily watched the cup, slyly removed it and put another of the same kind in its place. Unaware of this, Kailash picked

up the second cup and went home. When he reached his doorsteps he cried, 'Come and see what I have brought home.'

His wife came running but when she saw the brass cup, she was disappointed. She asked, 'Did you have to call out so loudly just to show me a brass cup ?'

'This is no ordinary cup that you see here. It is a magic one. Hold it and wish for your favourite food and it will be before you in a flash.'

The wife took the cup and wished ardently, but alas! nothing happened. She looked dubiously at it and wished again. But once again nothing came. Kailash was puzzled. He took the cup and wished for her. It remained as empty as it had been. He looked at the cup from all sides but it seemed the same to him. Why then did it not give him any food, he wondered. To make matters worse, his wife burst into tears. The vision of delicious food had come to naught and it made her feel more hungry than ever. Kailash looked at her helplessly and then he stamped out of the house. He went back to the forest and to the spot where he had met the hermit There was no one there. He sat under the same tree but though the hours passed by there was no sign of the hermit. When it became dark, Kailash gave up hope and returned home.

The next morning he left early and went back to the same place. As he waited there anxiously, he heard someone coming. He looked up to see the hermit coming towards him. The hermit asked, 'Son, why do I see you here again?'

'Sir, the cup you gave me has ceased to give food.'

'That is impossible', said the hermit. 'Show me the cup.'

When Kailash gave it to him, the hermit said, 'This is not the cup I had given you. Are you trying to deceive me and take two cups?'

'Never had such a thought entered my head,' protested Kailash. 'It is the same cup.'

'I tell you it is not the same,' said the hermit impatiently and ordered Kailash to relate all that had occurred the day before. When he had heard the story, he said, 'The woman in that hut has changed the cup and has given you an ordinary one.' Taking out a similar looking cup he gave it to Kailash and said, 'Take this cup to the hut and give it to the woman. Ask her to wish for anything and see what happens.'

Kailash, not understanding how this would get his first cup back, took the cup and went. The woman was at first afraid that he had come to demand his cup back, but to her delight he did no such thing. Instead he said, 'See, I have brought



another magic cup today. This will give you anything you ask for.'

The woman took the cup as the children clung to her clothes. She closed her eyes and wished. What she wished for we do not know except that the next moment two sticks, big and strong, shot out of the cup and rained blows on the woman. She ducked under the bed but the sticks followed her and hit her hard. She shrieked and screamed but the sticks did not for a moment stop their beating. At last she cried out, 'Take away this cup. I will give you the one you had brought yesterday.'

Kailash all this while had been struck speechless. He had not known that this cup was a cup of sticks. He picked up the cup and covered it with his hands. Immediately the sticks disappeared. When his magic cup was returned to him, he said to the children, 'I will come everyday to give you food.'

Taking both the cups, but being careful to keep the cup of sticks in a separate pocket, he returned home. Before he called his wife, he ordered the first magic cup to serve the most delicious meal. When the food was before him, he called her. He heaved a sigh of relief to see her eating her first square meal in days.

8

THE BROWN HEN

KASHMIR, which is the land of the wildest colours in spring, wears a mantle of snow in winter. The people retire to their homes and remain there weaving warm blankets and clothes. The *kangri*, an earthenware bowl, held in a frame of wicker-work, can be seen on every person, young and old. Hot embers are put into it and it is slipped under their voluminous gowns. This keeps them warm. But there are others who find the winter months too long and the time too heavy on their hands and so they go down to the plains of the Punjab where the winter is not so severe. Here they take whatever job comes their way and thus they manage to pass the long winter months. Sunder, a Kashmiri farmer, had come to the plains to take on the job of a domestic servant for the last two winters. Though he did get some money at the end of each month, he got it only after sheer hard work. From the crowing of the cock, till well-nigh midnight, the work at the house was such that at times poor Sunder did not know whether he was standing on his feet or on his head.

Well, two winters were enough to give him a grave dislike for house work. He wished to do something else for a change. He toyed with the idea of buying a hen as a humble start. The idea of starting a poultry farm had been his long cherished dream. A friend of his, who was also a shop-keeper

agreed to take on the responsibility of selling the eggs at a small commission. With a major hurdle removed, Sunder went and bought a hen. She was a brown one. She became the apple of his eye. She capered, she pecked and she clucked and to Sunder nothing could be more beautiful. Then came the time when she started laying eggs. Indeed their quality was so good that they sold at quite a high price and in a short while Sunder had made a neat sum. With this money he bought more hens, made an attractive coop for them and soon he boasted of a small poultry farm. He was far happier looking after the hens and chicks than he had been as a domestic servant.

He was proud of his poultry farm but proudest of all was he of his brown hen. She was to him the symbol of good fortune and he never tired of talking about her. All his conversation now centred around her—oh, she pecked so delicately, she strutted so majestically! Whenever he joined a group of his friends, they would exchange knowing smiles and settle down in a resigned sort of way for they knew that the conversation would now centre around the inevitable hen. This became such a pet topic of his that people started referring to him as 'Sunder, the brown hen'.

'Did you meet Sunder today ?'

'Who, the brown hen ?'

A time came when the name of Sunder was completely left out of the conversation and people started referring to him as the hen. As soon as the children of the village came to know of this nickname, they made Sunder's life miserable. Whenever and wherever they spotted him, they would cry, 'Brown hen, brown hen'. In the beginning Sunder would just shrug his shoulders and walk off, but when it became a regular affair it started getting on his nerves. To make matters worse, the older men

too joined in the fun. If they saw him, they would call out, 'Brown hen, how is your business getting along ?'

Sunder's irritation changed to anger and obsession. Whenever he stepped out of the house he was sure that everyone, everywhere was mocking at him with his nickname He brooded over this and soon he lost control of himself. Often when resting at home, he would imagine voices calling out, 'Brown hen, brown hen,' and he would rush out threatening to kill the imaginary offenders.

The village elders looked at such acts with a worried frown on their wrinkled foreheads. 'Brown hen is losing his sanity,' they would say. After a while, in a meeting of the elders of the village, it was decided that 'brown hen' needed a change of place and people to regain his sanity. They persuaded him to go to the plains. Sunder welcomed the idea and left for the plains. Here he set up a small shop. He spent happy days for though he had to work hard, the people were friendly. They did not know his nickname and so no one ever teased him. The years rolled by and Sunder's heart yearned to see his near and dear ones. He pondered over this for days. Should he take the risk of going back to his village, he asked himself repeatedly. Surely the name of brown hen had been forgotten by now, he thought consolingly. At last he made his decision to return.

As he went homewards and neared the Pir Panjal range, he met a group of people. The men fell a-talking. One of the men asked Sunder, 'Sir, from where do you come ?'

'I am on my way back from Punjab. I am going to Sopur.'

'Aha!' said another of the group, who had all this while been intently looking at Sunder, 'You

resemble the man we once knew as brown hen. Are you by any chance the same man ?'

Sunder stopped in his tracks. His heart was filled with anger and sorrow. So the name had not died down as yet, he thought despairingly. The village people would once again tease him back to insanity if he went back there. He bid the men goodbye saying, 'Yes I am the same person whom you once drove mad by giving him the nickname of brown hen. It seems the name is still fresh in your memory and you will once again make my life miserable. I am going back to Punjab and to my little shop there. No one knows my nickname and I thus live happily there.'

And so Sunder went back to the plains. He never went back to his village and the name of 'brown hen', it is said, gradually died out.

9

HOW THE CLIENT OUTWITTED THE LAWYER

AS the lawyer worked feverishly among the high pile of files in front of him, he heard an apologetic cough. He looked up wearily to see a man of the most humble appearance standing near the door.

'Come tomorrow,' said the lawyer and returned to his files.

The man, wringing his hands, stood where he was. He was the picture of misery. He sobbed out, 'Sir, please do not send me back. I am in great need of your help.'

'Come in,' said the lawyer and the man came in looking vastly relieved. He said, 'Sir, I have heard what a great lawyer you are. Your name is known throughout the *maraz*, the southern valley of Kashmir. It is said that you can win the most difficult cases for your clients. Sir, I had once been a farmer but I have changed my profession and now own a small shop in Pampur. Business of late had been so dull that I had to take loans from a money-lender. I have been unable to pay back even a small portion of the sum borrowed, with the result the interest on the loan has accumulated so much that it is now more than the sum borrowed. The money-lender has brought a case against me. What shall I do? I

do not have the money to pay back the money-lender just now or in the future.

The man's flattery had made the lawyer feel happy. He said, 'Do not worry. The money-lender will not be able to do you any harm. I may even free you of the loan; but as you know, my fee is high. I must be assured of payment before I can accept your case.'

'Of course,' replied the man. 'That is assured.'

'Then meet me at the court a week from today.'

On the appointed day, the man went to the court. Here he found his lawyer and the creditor with his lawyer. The man avoided the eyes of the creditor as he took his seat in the crowd. The judge arrived and the men walked into court.

First the creditor took the stand. He went into rapid detail about the amount of money he had lent to the shopkeeper, which the latter had failed to repay. 'He has no intention of repaying the sum,' added the creditor.

Then the shopkeeper took the stand and the judge asked, 'Do you wish to say anything ?'

The man looked blankly at him and then looked down at his own *patawa* or leggings. With much effort he said, '*zafran*'.

The court was startled in surprise at this strange reply. The lawyer appeared quite puzzled at the queer behaviour of his client. His forehead wrinkled up in deep thought, then quick as lightning, he rose to his feet and said to the judge, 'Sir, this man has not taken the large sum stated by the creditor. He had taken only 50 rupees and not the 150 of which he is charged.'

The man all this while had been repeating the word *zafrañ* over and over again. The judge

demanded, 'Why does he repeat the word *zafran* over and over again ?'

'Sir, this man once owned a large field of *zafran* on the saffron plateau of Pampur. Last year the field was full of the rich purple blossoms of *zafran*. These blossoms had turned the dry and uninviting plateau of Pampur into a rare and wonderful garden. The delicious perfume of the flowers had scented the very air of that region. Then a forest fire burnt the whole crop of *zafran* to the ground. The man never recovered from the shock and that is why he keeps repeating the word *zafran* to himself.'

The judge was quite touched by the sad story. The man was indeed rolling his eyes in a painful manner as he repeated the word *zafran* to himself. He was set free and the loan struck off his name. The lawyer was a happy man that evening as he waited to receive his fee from his gratified client. The latter came with the same blank stare he had had in the court. The lawyer rubbed his hands in satisfaction and said, 'See how easily I won your case. Give me the fee and go home in peace.'

The blank look had not left the face of the shopkeeper. In a dull voice he said, '*zafran*.'

'O forget that game. It is all over now. Come, give me my fee.'

'*Zafran*,' repeated the client.

'Do you mean to say that you are trying to dupe me as you had duped the judge ?' the lawyer asked in shocked tones, but the word *zafran* was all that he could get out of the man. He realised that for the first time in his career he had been outwitted by a client. He bowed his head in defeat and the shopkeeper went home.

10

THE THIEF

HERE is an interesting incident in the life of Mahadev, the notorious thief of Kashmir.

Mahadev was in his days called the king of thieves. This was so because in all his years of stealing he had never been caught committing a theft. Indeed, so noiselessly did he pursue his trade, that he was often referred to as a cat-thief. Thefts and burglaries were committed at random all over the valley and though the police knew that it was the work of Mahadev, they could never pin the crimes on him for they had no proof to justify their suspicion. And so, an air of embarrassment hung over their heads. But Mahadev, in spite of everything, was a kind man. True, he had stolen lacs of rupees, but he kept only a small portion of it for his personal wants. He used the rest of the money in helping the needy, the poor and the sick people of his land.

That Mahadev was greatly admired by his brother thieves perhaps needs no mention. They tried to perfect their art as he had done. But they wished to test for themselves and see whether he was really fit for the high pedestal they had set him on. They called a meeting of thieves and the leader of the group said to Mahadev, 'You are indeed the greatest thief of all times. We do not dispute that. Are you willing to accept the challenge we have set for you ?'

'And what is that ?' asked Mahadev.

'Well,' said the leader, feeling a trifle embarrassed

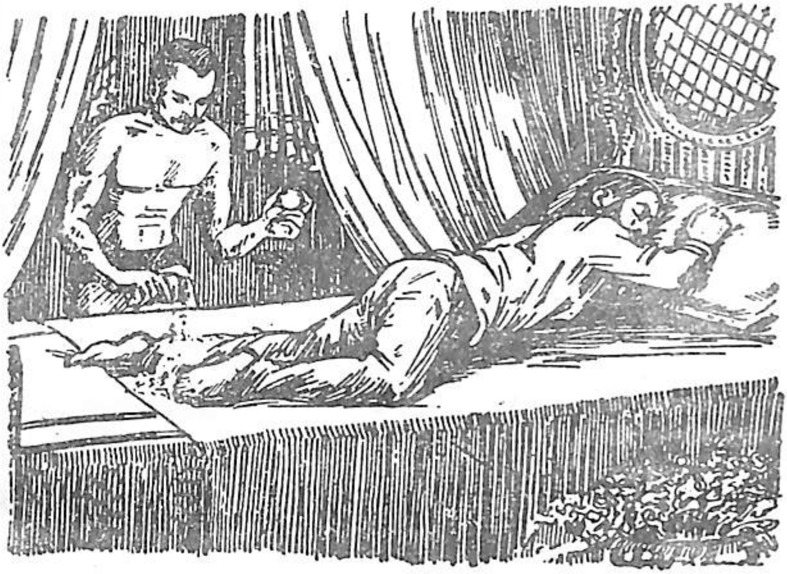
and cracking his fingers to cover it, 'Can you take off the *paijama*[1] of the king without his knowledge ?'

'What ! such an ordinary task and you were afraid that I may refuse ?' said Mahadev scornfully. 'Give me a week's time and you shall have the royal *paijama*.

The audience could not hide the look of admiration that sprang into their eyes at his bold words. The challenge was accepted and the crowd dispersed. For the next five days Mahadev spent his time in the study of the entrances and exits of the palace, the daily programme of the king and the position of the guardposts. He was unperturbed even though he knew that he had over-reached himself this time. On the midnight of the sixth day, he oiled his body and left for the palace. He went along the Sunt-i-kul, the apple tree canal that flows immediately opposite the palace. Then he swam across to the Kut-i-kul, a water-course that flows just below the palace. He swam below the surface of the water so as not to be spotted by the palace guards who patrolled along the long looped wall. Into this Kut-i-kul, a large pipe from the royal bathroom emptied itself. He squeezed his oiled body through this pipe and inched his way along. After a suffocating journey through the pipe he found himself in the king's bathroom. The bathroom led to the dressing room and thence on to the royal bedroom. Here he found the king fast asleep.

Mahadev took out a small bottle which he had fastened to his waist. It looked harmless enough, but on closer examination, swarms of red ants could be seen in it. He uncorked the bottle near the feet of the king. The ants, happy at the escape, crawled merrily out of the bottle and along the legs of the

1. Long pants.



king. Mahadev hid himself behind the silk curtains and waited in breathless silence. Soon the ants did exactly what they were expected to do—they started biting the legs of the king who at first tossed about restlessly and then he started flinging his legs about. At last he could bear it no longer and called out, 'Take off my *paijama*. The ants are killing me.'

Mahadev did not lose a second. He quickly, and with deft fingers, removed the *paijama* and slipped out the way he had come. The next morning he came to the meeting place of the thieves. This time there was a larger crowd than the time when the challenge had been made and accepted. Thieves from every corner of the valley had assembled to see whether Mahadev, their idol, had succeeded in keeping his word. Mahadev proudly entered and placed the royal *paijama* in their midst. An exclamation of surprise and pleasure escaped the lips of the men. In one voice they joyously accepted him as their king.

11

THE MAGIC SPELL

THERE lived a brahmin and his disciple in the village of Parihaspur in Kashmir. Once he had some work in the neighbouring village. As the way to this village led through a thick forest, the two men set out early one day so as to finish their work ere darkness set in. They had barely left the village and entered the forest when every tree seemed to become alive, for from behind each tree stepped out an armed robber. They caught the stammering brahmin and the disciple and led them to their leader. One look at him and the captives felt their blood go cold. He was a large, hefty man with blood-shot eyes and a heavy moustache which failed to hide a crafty smile. He said to the brahmin, 'We will do you no harm if you do as you are told. Your friend will go back to your village and bring a big ransom whilst you will stay here a while. After we receive the ransom, you will be set free.'

Before the disciple left for the village, he whispered to the brahmin, 'I shall come with the ransom so there is no need to feel nervous, but heed my words and heed them well. Tonight is the night of the lunar eclipse. Do not on any account be tempted to weave your magic spell. Hold your peace and all will be well.'

The magic spell which the disciple referred to was one in which the brahmin excelled. It was a precious one and though he guarded it jealously, it had one defect. It could be created only once a year during the lunar eclipse. When he did so a shower

of diamonds fell on his laps. So every year, away from the eyes of his fellowmen, he wove the spell and collected the diamonds. It was this spell which the disciple had wisely advised him to refrain from.

The disciple left and the brahmin was tied to a tree. Darkness set in and the robbers settled down for the night. As the time of the eclipse approached, the brahmin thought, "Will the men not set me free if I weave the spell and give them the diamonds ? I will tell them of my spell and of the riches it will bring them. Once they get the jewels they will set me free."

Just as the eclipse was about to take place, the brahmin wove the spell. Immediately a handful of diamonds fell on the ground before him. He called the leader of the gang and asked, 'Will you set me free if I give you all those jewels ? I got them by weaving my magic spell.'

'Of course,' replied the leader, as he picked up all the wealth lying before him. 'Of what further use will you be to us ?'

The men untied the rope and the brahmin, shaking himself free, asked once again, 'Can I now go back to my village ?'

'Go anywhere you like,' replied the leader, as he ran his fingers through the jewels. Then tying them up in a piece of cloth he gave orders to his men to depart. Suddenly a deafening noise was heard and another big horde of robbers appeared in view, flashing their daggers and ready to attack. The leader of the first gang cried, 'Why do you wish to kill us ? This brahmin here is capable of weaving a spell that can bring down a shower of diamonds. Seize him and get your wealth.'

The fleeing brahmin was caught by the nape of his neck and was ordered to weave the spell. One of the robbers had his dagger pointed at the brahmin's chest in the most threatening manner. The

frightened man turned his eyes first to the dagger, then to the robber and then back to the dagger. He stammered out, 'Sirs, the spell you order me to weave now just cannot be done. The spell can only be effective on the night of the lunar eclipse. This will take place exactly after one year. You will have to bear your patience till then.'

'What, wait for one year ?' said the leader of the second gang. 'Why should we wait for one year when you have already given such riches to the other group ? It is now or never,' he added threateningly.

The brahmin pleaded with folded hands, 'If it had been possible then I would have created the spell this very moment, but the time has passed and I am powerless.'

"If that is so,' hissed the leader, 'Then taste the fruit of your helplessness,' and with this he drew out his dagger and stabbed the brahmin. Then flashing the bloody dagger, he fell upon the first group, calling upon his men to do the same. A bloody fight ensued and at the end all the robbers of the first group and most of those of the second, lay dead or dying. The leader of the second gang picked up the jewels and when the men saw this, they fell a-fighting amongst themselves. They went on killing each other till only the leader remained alive. But he too had been mortally wounded and he had hardly stumbled forward a few steps when he, too, fell down dead.

The next day, the disciple returned with a bag of jingling coins. When he saw the dead bodies, he murmured, 'I am sure the master did the very thing I had forbidden to do. He searched out the brahmin's body and cremated it. Then picking up the jewels, which lay scattered on the ground, he put them in his bag of coins. Then he sadly returned home, murmuring as he went, 'Greed was the undoing of so many men.'

12

THE FOOLISH KING

THIS story is of a long, long time ago, before Shergarhi became the capital of the kings of Kashmir. It tells us about the time when the fairy land of Kashmir was ruled not by one king but by many, each living in his own throne city. Into one such city, there once came a group of *fakirs*[1]. They liked the city, for it was as beautiful as a picture. There was a broad track with a grassy border, bounded by a rippling stream and shaded by large walnut trees. This was the time of *hard*[2]. It was a delight to watch the farmers as they harvested acres and acres of cultivated land, terraced squares and crescents of rice, maize, seasame and amaranth fields.

The *fakirs* found one thing queer in this village. Everything was sold at precisely the same price. This meant the gold was as cheap as coal and saffron was sold at the same rate as salt. This state of affairs greatly pleased one of the *fakirs*. He said, 'This is a fine place to live in. We can eat the best food at a nominal price. Let us rest here awhile.'

'No, no,' said the leader of the group. 'If everything is bought and sold at the same price then justice, too, is probably bought and sold here. It is dangerous to tarry in such a place. Let us make haste and depart.'

But the first *fakir* would not hear of it. As the leader failed to persuade him, he was left behind whilst the others moved out of the city. As ill-luck would have it, a daring theft took place that very

1. Holy men.
2. Harvest.

night. When the king heard of it, he ordered that any stranger who was to be found in the city, was to be caught and hung for the burglary. When the men saw the strange *fakir*, they caught hold of him and accused him of the theft. Though he vehemently denied having anything to do with the theft, no one even listened to him. They dragged him to the king, who gave one look at the robust body of the stranger and ordered him to be executed the next day. He was taken away and thrown into prison.

The innocent man was in tears. Why, oh, why had he not listened to the wise advice of his chief and left the queer city with its queer ways? He sobbed and wrung his hands in helplessness at his miserable fate. He sent a message to his chief about his sad plight.

The day of the execution dawned and the people thronged to the market square where the *fakir* was to be publicly hanged. The hangman was there in his black mask and waited the arrival of the king. The chief of the group of *fakirs*, arrived in haste and was seen whispering to the condemned *fakir*. He said, 'When the king arrives, I will go to him and beg him to hang me instead of you. Everytime I say this, you must vehemently say, 'Sire, do not allow such a thing, hang me.'

Though the *fakir* could not understand how such a thing could save him, he piously put his faith in his patron *Pir* or saint and nodded. The king soon arrived in his gilded carriage. As he alighted, the old *fakir* ran forward and fell at his feet, sobbing, 'My lord, do not hang this unfortunate man. He has an old mother to maintain. What will become of her when he is no more? I am old and my days are numbered. Hang me in his place and you will be doing a kind act.'

Hardly had he finished speaking when the condemned *fakir* cried, 'Sire, do not allow such an injustice, hang me.'

The chief of the *fakirs* repeated his request, not once, but at least half a dozen times, giving various reasons. Each time, the condemned *fakir* played his part by protesting vigorously. The king looked in wonder from one to the other as they spoke. He was surprised and could hardly find his voice. Both the men were willing to die : But why ? Not being able to understand the situation, he called the two *fakirs* and taking them aside, asked them, 'What is the meaning of all this ? Why are you both willing to die ? It is natural for a man to save himself, but both of you seem eager to die. Explain yourselves properly.'

The older *fakir* said, 'My lord, if you have the sacred books of the saints read to you, you will find, it is written down years and years ago by them that this is the most auspicious day to die. The man who dies today, will surely find a place in paradise, no matter how great a sinner he may be. But this is a great secret known only to a few.'

The king had always been worried about how to get into paradise and had been performing various ceremonies for a long time, all with the hope of getting an undeserved entry into the coveted place. Being rather gullible, he was delighted to hear the *fakir's* secret and straight away believed it. Turning to the crowd he cried, 'My dear people, as the holy books say this day is the most auspicious day for dying, I have a great desire to relinquish my life today. I hereby order you to hang me instead of these innocent men here, so that my soul may go to heaven.'

Well, the king had always been obeyed, no matter how foolish his orders were. So his people promptly took him and hanged him before he had any chance to change his mind. The *fakirs*, blessing their stars, disappeared from the scene as fast as their legs could carry them.

13

THE STORY OF THE BRASS UTENSILS

ONCE in the village of Ghar near Katra in Jammu, there lived a young peasant. He had moved into the village just a year before our story begins, but in this short span of time he had made friends with all the elders of the village. He was always eager and at hand to do odd jobs for them. They in turn liked the young man and trusted him. It seems they had forgotten the proverb of the forefathers, '*Grust yar kayar nar*'. In other words, 'the friendship of a peasant is like pinewood, it soon burns out.' This young peasant had not cultivated the friendship of the elders just for the love of it. He had carefully chalked out a plan for himself and he worked accordingly. His plan was to defraud the simple village folk.

One day he approached the villagers and requested them to lend him some of their precious brass utensils as he had need of them. This request was strictly in keeping with the tradition of the village where utensils were lent out or borrowed whenever festivities of any kind were celebrated. So this request did not give rise to raised brows. On the contrary, the neighbours were happy to be of some use to this young man who had always lent his hand in their hour of need. Each of them lent him a few of their brass utensils. After keeping them for a couple of days the peasant returned them to their respective owners, but with a slight

difference. Each neighbour found a new brass item among the things returned. They naturally questioned the young man who carelessly answered, 'O, you are talking of the new brass utensils ? Your utensils begot them, so please keep. Such a profitable request could not be denied and so the neighbours accepted the extra utensil with pleasure.

A few weeks elapsed and the young man approached another group of villagers and made the same request, 'Could you lend me a few of your brass utensils for a few days ?' The villagers willingly placed their spare utensils at his disposal, for had not someone said that utensils kept in his custody begot new utensils ? Once again the man returned their utensils after a few days with a new brass item for each. This was accepted as happily as the explanation for its presence.

The villagers were now very pleased with the peasant. They praised him in his presence and even in his absence. They cast benign glances at him whenever he happened to pass by. Word had gone around to the next village too and the elders of that village came and offered him their utensils whenever he had need for them.

In the course of time, the peasant not only borrowed and duly returned their utensils but once again there were new utensils for each family. The people of the two villages basked happily in the generosity of the peasant and all went well for the next few months. After that period, the young man made it known to one and all of the two villages that he would be celebrating a special occasion on a grand and lavish scale, in the near future. Would the neighbours be kind enough to lend him their precious utensils once again ? Of course they would lend them to *him*, they said excitedly, each dreaming of the new brass utensil he would be getting. They hastily brought out all

their best brass utensils and personally carried them to his house. Then they waited eagerly for the celebrations to start.

Days passed by but the house of the peasant remained quiet. They counselled patience to each other and set their eyes on their neghbour's door, waiting for some sign to indicate that the celebrations were about to start. But a bare and quiet appearance was all that greeted them day in and day out. They now started feeling uneasy. A quick meeting of the elders of the two villages was called. What could be the cause of the silence, they asked one another.

'Let us go and question him,' suggested one. This proposition was at once accepted and the elders filed out to the peasant's house. The peasant had been expecting this. The moment he saw them coming, he sat down and set out a loud wail. The elders found him thus. He was sitting on the bare ground and wailing. The villagers were convinced that he was in deep trouble. Full of concern, the leader of the group asked, 'Son, what trouble has assailed you that you sit thus beating your head and wailing ?'

'Sirs,' sobbed the man, 'A calamity has overtaken me. It would have been of no consequence if it had affected only me but because it affects each one of you, may the earth open up to swallow me.'

'How is that ?' asked one of the villagers, a feeling of uneasiness stealing over him. 'What sort of calamity has overtaken you that can affect us also speak clearly.'

'O sirs,' wailed the man, louder than ever, 'Your precious utensils have perished.'

'Perished !' they chorused in sheer disbelief. 'How can utensils made of brass perish ? Whoever

heard of such a thing ? Do you really expect us to believe that they have perished ?'

'And why not ?' asked the peasant impertinently. 'Did you not believe me when I told you that your utensils had begotten new ones ? If brass utensils can beget new utensils, why can they not also perish ?'

The men had no answer to this. They were at a complete loss for words. What answer could they possibly give. They remained silent, looking at each other in the hope that someone would give a fitting reply. But not one was forthcoming. They realised that they had been cheated but they could not do anything about it. Thus they lost their utensils.

The deceitful peasant disappeared one night. He sold the huge collection of utensils and became a rich man. His well thought-out plan had worked out just as he had anticipated due to the stupidity of the village folk.

14

SHABRANG

ONCE a king of Kashmir went on a visit to a neighbouring kingdom. Here the princess of the land was very beautiful, more than anyone he had ever seen and he wished to marry her. He proposed to her and asked, 'Will you become my queen and return with me to my kingdom ?'

The princess agreed and then she said a very strange thing. She said, 'I have always wanted to marry someone like you so that one day my son could marry your daughter.'

The king did not understand her words. They sounded meaningless to him. He married the princess and together they left for the capital of Shergarhi. But, strange as it may seem, once the king was there, he ceased to take any interest in his new queen. He never visited her palace nor did he send messengers to inquire about her welfare. The new queen did not like this and at the earliest opportunity she went back to her father's palace.

Months passed by but no news or inquiry came from the king. The new bride became the mother of a bonny little boy. He was dark and so he was named Shabrang, the colour of night. The mother refused to intimate to the king about the birth of the child.

As the boy grew up he was given instructions in

various subjects fit for a prince. But along with this his mother also wanted him to become an expert thief. Why it should be so, she refused to disclose even to her parents. So she engaged an old and veteran thief who was notorious in the trade. The prince set down to study the art as was the wish of his mother. It was not long before the tutor said that the prince had become an expert thief. Calling Shabrang to her, the mother said, 'Son, today you are fit for the job for which you have undergone such rigorous training. A couple of months after my marriage, your father deserted me. I had vowed at that time that I would avenge the humiliation I have suffered at his hands. This is what you are to do. Go to Shergarhi and enter the king's service. Then commit such daring burglaries that will baffle both the king and the police, till out of sheer helplessness the king will be compelled to announce that if the thief surrenders himself he will be married to the king's daughter, the princess. When this occurs, acknowledge the thefts but do not accept the marriage proposal. Send word to me and await my coming.'

With these words of advice, she sent him on his mission at Shergarhi, it did not take Shabrang long to strike up a friendship with the palace-guards. Wherever he went, the people admired his handsome face and muscular build. They whispered to one another, 'Who is this handsome stranger?'

Soon Shabrang secured a place in the king's guards. Then one night he committed his first theft and he hid all the stolen goods in a hole under a *chenar* tree. He covered up the hole with great care. This theft was followed by half a dozen more burglaries, each more daring than the previous one. The police were baffled and the citizens were frightened. Who was the man whose burglaries were so daring and cunning, they wondered. They had

neither seen nor heard the like of it before. There was no question of suspicion ever resting on Shabrang, for every morning at the stroke of the clock, he was back at the palace, looking as fresh as anyone after a good night's sleep.

The king was rather disturbed at these daring thefts. Never before had his kingdom been harassed like this. He reprimanded the policemen for lack of efficiency in their ranks. This rebuke hurt them to the quick and one of them volunteered to patrol all the streets of the capital in an attempt to catch the thief.

Night-time came and the world went to sleep. All was quiet. Only the crunching of the policeman's boots could be heard echoing and re-echoing in the stillness of the night. He was walking along the outskirts of the capital when he heard a monotonous kind of noise as though someone was grinding corn. In the darkness, he saw the flickering of a lamp and in its light he saw a woman grinding corn. He walked impatiently towards her and asked, 'Why are you grinding corn so late at night?

'Sir,' replied the woman, 'I could not do any work as my child was ill. He is asleep now and so I am here.'

'Have you seen anyone pass this way ?

The question seemed to frighten the woman. She asked nervously, 'Why, have you seen anyone ? A man came last night and stole wheat from my wooden granary. I am sure he will come for more today.'

'Good,' said the policeman. 'I will await him here and capture him when he comes.'

'But sir, he will flee the moment he sees your uniform. The best arrangement would be for you

to wear my clothes. You can then sit in my place and pretend to grind corn. When the thief comes you can immediately capture him.'

The policeman accepted the proposal and donned the Kashmiri woman's clothes. He then sat down in her place to grind corn.

The next morning, news of more burglaries, committed the night before, spread through the capital. The king, apart from feeling more worried, was also wondering where the policeman had disappeared. Nowhere in the capital could he be found. At last after a long search, he was found in the outskirts of the city dressed in a woman's dirty clothes, grinding corn. He could have died with mortification when he was brought before the king.

For the next two nights, two senior police officers went out in an attempt to catch the elusive thief, but they too met with the same fate. The king now was at his wit's end. The thief had not only committed burglaries of the most daring nature but had also made fools of his officers. 'Your Majesty,' urged the courtiers, 'the thief must be made to stop his burglaries if anyone is to remain in the capital.'

What was the king to do ? Day and night he tried to think of a way out, till at last he reached a final decision. The people were aghast when they heard of it. The king had it drummed through the streets and lanes of the capital that he, the king, would give his daughter in marriage to the thief if the latter came forward and vowed never to commit a burglary again.

A huge crowd collected before the palace the next day to see if the thief would surrender himself. Who was he, they wondered. The people whispered and wondered as the minutes ticked by. A drummer came up to the gates and once more announced the

proclamation of the king. Shabrang, who was standing in the crowd, walked out and stood before the king.

'What have you to say ?' asked the king.

'Your Majesty, I am the thief who has committed the burglaries,' said Shabrang and to prove his words, he took the king to the *chenar* tree under which he had kept all his loot. Among them was the policeman's uniform.

True to his word, the king offered his daughter in marriage when Shabrang vowed that never again would he commit any theft. Shabrang at the king's offer, said, 'I shall send for my mother. She will do the needful.'

His mother came as soon as she heard of the royal proposal. The king welcomed her and renewed his proposal. When he spoke thus, Shabrang's mother said, 'Shabrang can no more marry the princess than a brother can marry a sister.'

'How is that ?' asked the king, much surprised at her words.

Shabrang's mother related how the king had married her years ago and had later deserted her. She also reminded him of her words, 'I have always wanted to marry someone like you so that one day my son can marry your daughter,' which she had spoken when he had proposed to her. The king remembered the past and was happily reconciled to his queen. Shabrang was welcomed by the king and the people and was accepted as the heir to the Shergarhi throne.

15

THE FEAST OF PUNJAB

MANY years ago, a man from a village of Punjab went to Kashmir as the guest of his rich Kashmiri friend. The friend had a lovely house with pretty latticed windows. It was spring and the roof-tops of birch-bark and earth were covered with iris, purple, white and yellow. The guest was enchanted.

To welcome his friend, the Kashmiri ordered a grand feast The cooks and the ladies of the house spent a busy day, cooking dish after dish. At last lunch was announced and the men were ushered into the hall. The earthenware platters filled with brightly coloured food presented a pretty sight. On one dish stood delicious looking rice cooked in saffron. Poultry cooked in a variety of ways filled a number of plates. Vegetables, fruits and sweets completed the fare.

Lunch began and as the friend tasted all he dishes served before him, the Kashmiri waited eagerly for words of praise. Imagine his disappointment when the friend said, 'Though the meal is wonderfully cooked, it cannot compare with the feasts served in our village.'

The host's disappointment was great and he spent a restless afternoon. Probably the feasts of Punjab were more elaborate, he thought. He summoned his cooks and ordered them to cook dinner on a grander scale. There was great hustle and bustle

in the kitchen as the delicacies of Kashmir were prepared one after another. *Goshtaba*, a special meat dish cooked in curd, *tabak-maz*, meat balls with the flavour of mint, *rogan josh*, a spicy meat dish, and *kabab* occupied the centre of the table. These were surrounded by saffron rice and fifteen different varieties of vegetables. On a separate low table, fruits, luscious and ripe, made a fascinating picture. On yet another table were set plates of Kashmiri sweets covered with silver paper. This dazzled in the light of the *diyas* that hung from the low ceiling.

The grand fare was set before the friend and the Kashmiri waited in agonising silence. Now surely his friend would not say that it did not compare with the feasts of his village. With the great variety of food served, dinner took a long time. At last the friend spoke, 'Dear friend, this time your food was fit for the table of a king but still it failed to compare with the feasts I have at home.'

The Kashmiri nearly dropped down in disappointment. What were the feasts of his friend's village like ? How lavish were they that the rich fare of Kashmir could not even compare with them ? The next morning he decided that he would serve the best food that the whole of Kashmir could offer. He named it the 'Feast of Kashmir'. He hurriedly engaged another cook, who was known throughout the valley for the delicacies he cooked. The best viands, vegetables and fruits were brought to the Kashmiri's doorstep. With all the excitement in the kitchen, one would imagine that a wedding feast was being prepared. Delicious aromas emanated from the kitchen and filled the house. Lunch time arrived and the servants hurried forward to place plate after plate of delicacies before the guest. Lunch was eaten in silence. In spite of the excellent food served before him the Kashmiri could hardly relish it, for he was impatient to know what his friend had to say today.

He nervously bit his finger-nails when the friend turned to speak to him. 'I would really have said that the food today was incomparable, had I not tasted the feasts at home.'

The Kashmiri silently acknowledged defeat and for the rest of his friend's stay, though he always had the best food served, he no longer tried to compete with the food the friend ate in his village. Eventually the friend returned to his land. The years rolled by. One winter the Kashmiri left his snow-bound land to enjoy the climate of the plains of Punjab. He decided to visit his friend. It would be a good opportunity to taste the feast his village had to offer, for the thought had never really left the Kashmiri's mind. The friend was delighted to see him after so many years. 'Do tarry and rest here awhile,' he implored and the Kashmiri willingly accepted.

That evening the Kashmiri spent the hours in great expectation. Dinner was served. A servant brought in two plates. *Chapatis* or wheat bread, a cup of curd and a plate of vegetables was all that had been served. Then the servant departed. The Kashmiri waited expectantly. The servant did not reappear. His friend turned to him and said, 'Please start your meal.' He gulped down the food without a word. He schooled patience to himself. Surely tomorrow the delicacies of Punjab would be served before him, he thought.

One week passed, but the food served before him was the same every day. Finally the day of his departure arrived and still there was no change in the food. The Kashmiri could stay quiet no longer. He asked, 'Friend, when you were in Kashmir, no matter how rich the food I served to you, you always said that the food there could not stand comparison with the food of your village. Your village, I found, has no feast to offer. How then can you

dispute the superiority of the Kashmiri food ?'

The friend answered, 'When did I say that the food of my village was richer than yours ? We of this village are simple people and our tastes and habits too are simple. This is the secret of our health and prosperity. The food you served was too rich to be nourishing. It must also have cost you a great deal. What is the use of such food ?'

The Kashmiri had to acknowledge the strength of his friend's arguments. He returned home a changed man.

16

WISDOM OR WEALTH—WHICH IS SUPERIOR ?

ONCE there were two friends, one noted for his wit and wisdom and the other for his wealth. These two men always managed to steer their talks to one single question and that was who was superior, the rich man or the wise man ? The wealthy man said, 'There is no doubt that a wealthy man is far superior to any other man, be he wise or learned.'

To this the wise man would smile and say, 'There is no place in the world for foolish men though they may be as rich as the king himself. There is a wise saying '*Hakimas to hakimas nishih rachtam Khodayo,*' which means 'O God save me from physicians and rulers.' To this I would add, 'O God save me from fools, especially rich fools.'

Their argument would not end here. They would often take it to elders to arbitrate but to no avail. The wise arbitrators would say that wisdom was superior and the rich ones would say that wealth was superior. What now were they to do ? Someone had to decide once and for all who was superior, so they took their case to one minister who was considered to be the right hand of the king. But the minister was unable to answer such a grave

question, so he sent them to the king with his compliments.

Within a few days the king ordered them to his presence. He heard, with the greatest patience, the arguments of each, then calling for paper he addressed it to the minister who had sent them and scrawled across it, 'Execute them.'

The minister read the king's orders and had the two friends thrown into prison. Now this was something they had not bargained for. That their innocent question would land them in prison and then on to the executioner was beyond their understanding. They flopped down on the hard prison benches and throwing all arguments to the wind, they repented their behaviour. The wealthy man wailed, 'O my evil stars, of what use is my wealth to me now when death is near the door? I would give half my wealth to anyone who would save me from my doom.'

His friend pricked up his ears at these words. 'If that is so,' he said, 'then write down your promise on this paper and sign it.' The wise man gave a pen and paper to his friend who wrote a letter to this effect and handed it back to him. The wise man kept the note carefully away in the inner pocket of his *pheran*.[1] Then he told the sentry that they wished to be taken to the minister. They were led to him and the wise man, in his most pleading voice, said, 'Sir, we pray that you behead us this very evening. Please do not refuse us this last wish.'

The minister was astonished beyond words. Never had a more strange request been made to him. He asked, 'Why do you request me so earnestly to behead you ? We humans love life and for a few hours of it we are willing to sacrifice everything. Why then do you wish to die?'

1. Long coat

The wise man replied, 'My lord, man is mortal and must die one day. What does it really matter when we die ? On the other hand, it is written down in the scriptures that an innocent death will secure for the deceased a place in heaven. We are innocent persons and the moment life leaves our body, angels will lead us straight to heaven.' With his eyes to the heavens, the wise man shook his head.

The minister made up his mind. He would not be an instrument to the death of two innocent beings. He wrote to the king that he, the minister, was unable to carry out the king's orders and it would be acting against the dictates of his conscience.

The two friends were marched off to the king with the message. The king was intrigued. Never before had the minister dared to flout his orders. What then was the reason which had compelled him to act thus ? The king inquired and the wise man promptly related everything that had passed between the friends and then before the minister. He showed his friend's letter of assurance to give half of his wealth to the man who would save his life.

The king was greatly amused and he could not but help admire the ingenuity of the wise man who had so successfully fooled the minister. He freed the two men saying, 'You are at liberty to go. The wealthy man had already acknowledged the superiority of wisdom when he agreed to share his wealth with the man who had the ingenuity to save him from the clutches of death. You have not only managed to free him and yourself but you have also amassed a fortune for yourself. Go, and God be with you.'

The two friends shared the wealth and lived in peace.

17

THE IDLER

THE wife of a certain landlord was rather dissatisfied. If asked why, she could have given a long list of reasons to justify her dissatisfaction. But on the other hand, she could have also ideally summarised the whole cause of her dissatisfaction in just one word—idler. Yes, that is exactly what her husband was, an idler. He never exerted himself beyond absolute necessity because he not only hated work, he despised it. He was a landlord in a small way and owned a few *marlas*[1] of land. The rent and the corn that the tenants annually gave him were enough for him and his family to live comfortably. Why then should he work ? But his poor wife toiled from daybreak till well-nigh midnight, with all the house work to be done and the children to be looked after. It was this—her husband idling his time in gossip and gamble and she toiling herself to her bones—that irritated her and ruffled her pride. So to let off steam, she often grumbled and in the course of grumbling she would often refer to him as an idler. This term sometimes angered him and then he rebuked her sharply. This was like adding fuel to the fire Her anger would flare up all the more and her voice would rise to a shrill level as she pointed out to him his thousand and one faults. Not to be beaten, the husband would also raise his voice and shout back. Curious and interested neighbours would collect to watch the scene.

1. A measure of land.

This was usually enough to make the couple feel embarrassed and for the moment they would retire into glum silence. On days when the wife was particularly exasperated, she would threaten to leave the house.

Once just after a quarrel like this, a friend of the husband paid them a visit. The husband, in an injured tone, related about his wife's threat to leave him. It had made him feel nervous. After much thought the friend advised, 'Next time you quarrel, do not give your wife the chance to repeat her threat. On the contrary, you should not only threaten to leave the house, but you must actually leave it in a huff. You will see how your wife will fall at your feet and beg you to forgive her.'

The husband tried to imagine the scene and felt mighty pleased to think of his grumbling wife falling at his feet. The next day, however, the friend took his leave and the husband was left all alone to try out the plan and to depend on his own wits if things did not work out well. Of the success of the plan, he never had any doubt. How could the house exist without him ?

It was not long before he got the chance to put his friend's plan to test. A quarrel broke out between the husband and wife and just when it was threatening to come to a climax, the man said in an angry tone, 'I shall not stay a moment in this wretched house. I will leave immediately.' As he said these words, he gave a hopeful sidelong glance. Anger was writ large on his wife's face. She seemed not to have heard his words. 'I am going,' he repeated in a louder voice and got up to leave the room. He came to the doorstep, but his wife remained where she was. He took slow steps, expecting his wife to fall at his feet but she showed no signs of moving. How he hoped his friend was there to

tell him what he should do. He took faltering steps, one at a time, but there was no voice begging him to come back. He reached the front door but still there was no sign of his wife. He was now feeling rather embarsassed. What was he to do now ? He cursed his friend and his silly plan. He would have to leave their house now that he had given the ultimatum. Wondering where he had gone wrong, he walked slowly up to a friend's place. He chose to sit here from where not only could he see the front door of his house but where his wife too could easily spot him if she came out of the house. As he sat talking to his friend he looked now and then hopefully at his house. There was no sign either of his wife or of his children. The minutes and the hours ticked by but no one came out in search of him. He was at a complete loss as to what course of action he should take. His mind was in a whirl. Suddenly he saw his wife step out of the house. She looked hither and thither. Her gaze seemed to stop for a moment when she saw her husband. Hope welled up in his heart; but then with a shrug, she turned her head and took the lane going in the opposite direction. She disappeared into a friend's house. The man was not to be disheartened. He thought consolingly, 'Perhaps she has not seen me.'

He rose and walked hurriedly to the friend's house which his wife had just entered. In a very jovial manner he greeted the inmates of the house and then turning to his wife he said, 'I hope you have prepared a good meal today. I am feeling simply ravenous.'

The wife seemed not to have heard his words. Ignoring him completely, she gracefully took leave of her friend and then with her head high, she walked back home. The man was left gaping. He had not expected this sort of behaviour and did not know how to deal with it. To make it worse, her

friend had seen and heard all. He was embarrassed beyond words. He could think of nothing else to do but to go home. Swallowing his pride, he slowly walked back home. He met his wife at the bottom of the stairs. She gave him one look and said in her sourest voice, 'Idlers have no shame.' She then thumped up the stairs. The man meekly followed her.

18

THE PRIEST

THE priest, at the time when our story begins,
had but recently taken over the work of priest-
hood at the death of his father. Though he lived in
one village, his authority extended to the neighbour-
ing village also. This village was a small one,
probably the smallest one in the valley. It compris-
ed a few huts made out of roughly hewn wooden
logs. Over the simple village folk the priest ruled
with a heavy hand. Nothing could be done with-
out his implicit orders. The living and the dead
needed his services for the salvation of their souls.
No one dared to even arrange a marriage without
his prior consent, for fear that the bride would
bring evil to the house. The priest simply loved to
wield the power and authority he had and the
people feared the very frown on his forehead. They
heeded his words for who would risk his anger and
thus invite ill luck ?

In this tiny village there lived a young man with
his aged mother. He was known for his gentle and
quiet ways and was loved by all. Once when
mother and son went on a pilgrimage, they met the
parents of a girl of marriageable age. These people
liked the young man so much, that they expressed
their desire to wed their daughter to him. The girl
was far prettier than any in the village, so the
mother of the young man readily agreed to their
proposal and the two were wedded in a simple
ceremony.

The mother with her newly-wedded son and daughter-in-law returned to the village and held a reception in her house to celebrate the marriage. The priest was invited and accepted the invitation with a frown. He was actually indignant. These people had dared to do what no one had ever dared to do before. They had neither sought his permission nor had they invited him to the wedding. Such an action could not be allowed to pass without proper action, otherwise the rest of the village folk would do the same. If that happened, his authority would cease to exist. Apart from the material benefits that would be reduced, the people would lose their respect for him and his orders. No, he would have to act and act tactfully.

With this decision he went to attend the reception. When the old mother welcomed him and went to touch his feet, the priest raised his hand in blessing as stiffly as he could. Then he was taken in to give his blessings to the bride. She was brought before him. We do not know what passed through his mind, but we are told that he refrained from blessing her and asked the bride to be taken away. To the astonished mother-in-law he said, 'Get rid of this girl before her evil influences spell ruin to your house.'

'Evil influences !' ejaculated the old lady. 'Can you not give her something by which to ward off the evil ?'

The priest shook his head, succeeding in looking as sad as he was trying to look. He said, 'She exercises a great evil and nothing can wipe that out.'

'Whta then should we do ?' asked the miserable bridegroom, greatly worried.

'There is only one remedy, if you wish to save your house from sure doom. That is to get rid of the girl. If you wish to do this without giving rise to

any suspicion, then I can suggest a course. Put her in a wooden box and throw it into the river. Let her suffer what fate has in store for her. But there is one thing you must be sure to do. Put all the ornaments she has brought from her father's house, into the box. If they are left behind, then her evil influences will remain.'

The poor girl cried and pleaded to be saved from the terrible fate but her cries were stifled by the relatives of the boy. In the darkness of the night they tied and gagged the frightened girl, put her into a big wooden box with all the ornaments she had brought and threw the box into the river. The girl prayed to her favourite saint and waited to see what would happen to her. Tumbling and dashing against the stones and rocks, the wooden box went floating along. It had gone some distance when it suddenly struck mud and got stuck. The girl felt the box being dragged ashore and opened. In the light of the moon she saw a man and was frightened beyond words. Was he a robber, she thought with terror mounting in her heart.

The man on the other hand was surprised to see a girl thus gagged and bound. 'Who could have done such a cruel thing ?' he wondered. He undid the gag and the rope and said, 'Do not be afraid to tell me everything. I will do my best to help you.'

The kind words deeply touched the girl and she sobbed out her story The man became indignant.

'It is the priest who is the culprit,' he said shrewdly. He belonged to the priest's village and knew him well and knew too his mean ways. He had to be taught a lesson, the man decided.

Now, this man caught and sold monkeys to monkey-tamers and thus earned a living. He had just then trapped a wild one. He put this wild

monkey inside the wooden box and threw it back into the river saying, 'I am sure the priest is waiting expectantly by the banks somewhere. This should teach him a good lesson.'

The priest was indeed waiting impatiently for the box a little distance away. Though it was biting cold, he had lighted a *kangri*, an earthenware bowl of coal, and this hung on his chest and kept him warm. He planned to steal the ornaments and drown the girl. He was wondering at the delay, for according to his calculations, the box should have arrived about half an hour earlier. Had some robber snatched it up before it could reach him? Just then, in the dim light of the moon, he spotted it and heaved a big sigh of relief. He waded into the cold water and dragged it ashore. Then making sure that no one was about, he carefully opened it The monkey, happy at the opportunity to escape, pushed his way out and sprang upon the unsuspecting priest. The latter gave a loud scream as he



tottered back, but the monkey refused to leave him alone. It clawed and mauled him till the priest was a bleeding mess. Then suddenly, as though satisfied with its work, it turned tail and disappeared into the darkness.

The man escorted the girl back to her husband. Meanwhile word had already gone around about how the priest had been mauled by a wild monkey. When the full story was out, the people said, '*Bata kar, gata kar*', priest's work, dark work.

The disgraced priest left the village as soon as he was able to and no one ever saw him or heard of him again.

19

THE CHIEF QUEEN

RANI, a wood-cutter's daughter lived with her parents close to a large forest. She was a little child of a year and a half. One day when her mother had gone marketing, she had been left in her father's care. He put her to sleep under a large shady tree and went off to join his friends. Just when he had left, a crow flew in and perched on the branch of the tree under which Rani slept. It is difficult to understand the working of a crow's mind. It cawed, it blinked and then suddenly it flew down. Picking up the sleeping girl in its beak, it carried her away to its nest. Whilst the girl slept on, it got busy. It hurriedly built a bigger nest and filled it with fruits and walnuts.

The crow looked after her with such care and gave her such juicy fruits to eat that she soon grew into a sturdy little child. Often it would steal garments to clothe her. They soon became dear to one another. When the crow would fly away for the day she would often climb down and play among the *chenar* trees. She loved them with their light grey trunks and their dense foliage which formed a dark green mass in summer and a brilliant splash in autumn. The apple, walnut and grape vine grew wild all over the forest and she ate their fruit whenever she was hungry. She also loved to listen to the songs of the thrushes and to the rich tones of the golden orioles. She had a beautiful voice herself and would often sing to herself as she wove

garlands of wild flowers.

As the years passed by, she grew into a beautiful maiden. One day as she sat weaving a garland, she sang happily to herself. Just at that time the king of the land happened to pass by. He was enchanted by her voice and her beauty. Though she was shabbily dressed, her face was radiant. Flowers of the wildest shades were heaped in front of her and a sprig of brilliant, blazing mustard peeped out from behind her ear. The king dismounted from his fine white steed and asked her to marry him. She agreed and went away to his palace. There she became his third queen.

All the three queens were so beautiful that the king was unable to decide whom he should choose as his chief queen. He decided to put them to a test and then decide for himself. So he called them to his presence and said, 'I wish to choose one of you as my chief queen but you all are so beautiful and good that I am unable to decide. To be fair to all of you, I have decided on a test. Each one of you will be given a bare throne. This you must decorate according to your taste. The queen with the best decorated throne will become my chief queen.

The queens hastily returned to their palaces. The first and the second queen had been princesses and so they knew how best a throne should be decorated. They engaged the best craftsmen of the kingdom and set them to work under their instructions. The first queen had diamonds studded all over the throne in designs most intricate. The second queen decorated her throne with flowers made of emeralds and rubies. There was great hustle as the craftsmen worked feverishly.

The palace of the third queen remained quiet. The other queens laughed scornfully at it. Rani

was feeling very, very depressed. How could she know how a throne should be decorated when she had been brought up in the jungle amongst wild flowers ? As she sat thus, she heard the loud cawing of a crow. The crow dropped a bag on her lap as it flew over her head. She found some herbs in it. She took these out and soaked them in water. Then she painted the throne with that water.

Then the sun set and darkness spread its mantle over the world. The king with his courtiers came out to inspect the thrones. The throne of the first queen glittered and dazzled in the light of the hundreds of *diyas* or oil lamps that hung from the ceiling. The throne of the second queen was a thing of beauty. But the king was spellbound when he saw the throne of the third queen. It seemed as though thousands and thousands of *diyas* were burning all over the throne. The king chose her as his chief queen.

This made the other queens jealous and they spoke thus among themselves, 'It's highly improper and insulting that a jungle girl should become the chief queen whilst we should be left thus,' said one.

'Let us get rid of her,' suggested the second.

So they put their heads together and hatched an evil plot. That evening when the three queens went for a walk along the banks of the river, the first two queens pushed the chief queen into the water. She gave a loud scream as she fell with a splash into the river. As the fast currents carried her away she called loudly for help. The crow who had nursed her, heard her call. He cawed loudly and impatiently. Immediately thousands of crows came swarming. They all caught the clothes of the drowning queen and helped her ashore. There on the banks, far, far away from the capital, they built a little hut

for her and stocked it well with the fruits of the forest. Here she lived, sad and miserable.

The two queens had waited for some time after pushing the chief queen into the water before setting up a cry for help. 'The chief queen has drowned.' This reached the king as he was conducting some business. He was struck dumb with grief. In spite of extensive searches, there was no sign of the queen. The king was in tears. His favourite queen, the one so dear to him was no more. He sobbed and wept for days. Then one day he announced 'I am going out in search of my chief queen.'

The two queens tried to make him change his mind but he was adamant. He went to the river and walked along its banks. He walked on and on not knowing where he was going. A few days passed by in this manner. He felt tired and weak. Then one day as he entered a forest, he heard a beautiful voice singing mournfully. He at once recognised it to be that of his lost queen. He joyfully ran into the wooden hut to find her there. The queen told him the whole story of how the other two queens had pushed her into the river.

The next day he returned to the palace with the queen. He ordered the elder two queens to his presence and asked them sternly, 'Why did you push the chief queen into the river ?'

The queens were trembling with fright. They were wondering how she had returned alive. They were unable to give any satisfactory reply to the king. He ordered them to be hanged. Thereafter he lived happily with his favourite queen.

20

THE THREE BLIND BROTHERS

MAHESH was a *pujari*.[1] He rose early every morning, performed the ceremonial ablutions and put the caste mark on his forehead. He then departed to the Shiva temple of which he was the priest. The temple was an old one near the sacred pool at Tregam in the western part of the valley. It was a stone structure with a roof made out of beaten-out kerosene tins. The inside of the temple was lighted by a *diya*, the oil lamp. In the centre was the *lingam*, the symbol of Shiva, in black stone. Here Mahesh spent the whole day offering prayers and narrating long stories from the Hindu mythologies in the hope of some material gain. And he was not usually disappointed in his hopes, for a stream of worshippers came from early morning to offer prayers and gave him various offerings in the form of cash and kind. He and his wife lived on them.

One morning when he entered the temple he was surprised to see one of the richest landlords of that part of the valley waiting for him. The landlord had come before the usual crowd started to arrive. He said to Mahesh, 'I wish to offer special prayers. Tell me how this can be done.'

'For what do you wish to offer this special prayer ?'

1. A Hindu priest.

'I have no son and I wish for one. This is my reason for offering the prayer.'

'Offer a hundred rupees to the *lingam*. Out of this I shall give twenty-five rupees to the poor as alms. The rest I will use to offer prayers for you.'

The man took out a large bag of coins. Out of this he counted out a hundred coins and gave them to the priest. Then he went his way. Mahesh was happy to have got so much money in one day. He hurriedly finished his day's work and putting the coins in a bag, he hastened homewards to impart the good news to his wife. He had walked but a little distance when he saw a blind beggar. Remembering his promise to give twenty-five rupees in alms, he took out the coins and put them in the outstretched hand of the beggar, saying, 'Here, take these twenty-five rupees. I had given my word to donate the sum in alms. You should be happy and proud that you are the lucky beggar to receive the sum.'

'How much money did you get that you can afford to give such a large sum in alms? Never in all my years as a beggar have I earned so much money in one day.'

'The man who came to offer prayers gave a hundred rupees. Now I have only seventy-five rupees left.'

The beggar was considering how lucky he was to receive the money. As he thought of the rest of the money in the priest's bag and of the easy way he had acquired it, his heart filled with envy and greed. In a pleading voice he said, 'Sir, will you permit me just for a tiny second, to put my hand in your bag and feel the coins? The jingling of the coins would be like music to my ears.'

The priest saw no harm in this and so opened

the bag and held it out to the blind beggar. For a moment the beggar lovingly fondled the coins. Thoughts were racing through his mind. Suddenly he let out a loud cry, 'Help, help.' Before the priest could collect his wits, a crowd collected.

'What is the matter ?' asked the men.

'This man is robbing me of my hard-earned money,' sobbed the beggar, all the while keeping his hand clenched inside the bag. The priest tried to explain but no one would believe him. To the onlookers it appeared that he was trying to snatch the bag from the beggar. The crowd became indignant. Someone even slapped his face. The priest realised that he had been fooled by the beggar's cunning. Moreover he could not hope to prevail against an angry crowd. Helplessly and very near to tears, he gave the bag to the beggar. He then returned home and sobbed out the whole story to his wife.

His wife did not lose heart. Instead she said, 'What is the use of moaning over loss'? God had given you the money and if God is willing, you shall get it back. Calm down and think out a way by which you can get back the money and in the process can also teach the deceitful beggar a lesson.'

The wife's words encouraged him and the two put their heads together and chalked out a plan. The priest left home and followed the blind man. Towards evening, the latter went into a hut. He went feeling his way to his brother who sat dozing in one corner. He was also blind. The beggar said to him, 'Today I have earned a hundred rupees and I am afraid to keep so much money with me. Can you tell me what I should do ?'

'From where did you get so much money ?' asked the other in wonder.

The beggar went closer to him and whispered the whole story to him. The brother felt uneasy but the beggar assured him that all was safe. Thus assured, the brother said, 'Put the money into the pocket of my *pheran*.[1] As I always wear it, there is no danger of its getting lost.'

The beggar, either did not trust the brother or he could not bear to be parted from the whole sum, for he did not immediately give the money to the other man. Instead he counted out 60 coins and put them in his own pocket. The remaining coins he slipped into his brother's pocket. He then lay down to sleep whilst his brother rose to go to the mosque as the time for the *namaz* (prayers) was drawing near. Going into the inner hall of the mosque, he knelt down to pray. Whilst the blind man prayed, the priest, who was kneeling just behind him, slid his hand into his pocket, got his hands on the coins and stealthily drew it out. He then hastily went back home.

The *namaz* over, the blind man rose and felt his pocket. Not a coin jingled, not a coin could his fumbling fingers find. 'Who could have taken the money,' he asked himself over and over again. He complained to the *mulla*[2] of the mosque about the theft, but the old man just shook his head and said, 'You should not have kept so much money in your pocket. Whom can you accuse in this big crowd ?'

The blind man tottered homewards, wondering how he would break the news to his brother. Well, it had to be done and so he woke him up and told him everything The beggar did not allow him to finish. He set up a loud wail as soon as he realised what his brother was trying to tell him. In sympathy, the brother too joined him.

1. Long coat.
. A Muslim priest.

Now these two men had another brother, the eldest of them all. When he heard the hue and cry of the two men, he came and asked, 'Whatever is the meaning of all this wailing ?'

The brother who had lost the money in the mosque told him everything whilst the beggar sobbed, 'O where shall I keep the rest of the money now ? I have only sixty coins left. If this too is stolen, then the cunning way I deprived the man of his money would have been in vain.'

The eldest brother too was blind. He said, 'Stop your wailing and let me think of a way of safely hiding your money.' He sat down, his forehead wrinkled in deep thought.' 'Aha,' he said after a moment. 'Here is a simple solution. The *pheran* which I wear is made of coarse cloth. Put the money in a bag and give it to me. I will stitch the bag into my *pheran*. Then there will be no danger of its getting lost.'

The beggar, it seemed, was convinced because he gave the money to the eldest brother who put it in a small bag and stitched this into the inner folds of his *pheran*. The three men then lay down to sleep.

Not a word, not an action had missed the ears or eyes of Mahesh. He followed the eldest brother to his place of rest. There he quickly collected some ants and put them inside the blind man's *pheran*. They crawled all over and bit him. The blind man was in agony. At first he tossed about restlessly and then finally he flung his garment away to rid himself of the pests. Suddenly he remembered the wealth stitched into his *pheran* and his fumbling hands sought it out where it had fallen. He gave a sigh of relief when he found it. But Mahesh had been too quick for him. The moment the blind man had put

down his *pheran*, Mahesh picked it up and put another in its place.

When the brothers realised the loss of the entire money, they were indignant. They went straight to *nambardar*, the headman of the village, and complained, 'We three brothers have been robbed. It is your duty as headman to catch the thief and get him severely punished.'

When the *nambardar* heard their story he realised that the man who had robbed them was an extremely clever and cunning man. He wanted to meet such a man and so he had it proclaimed that if the thief came and surrendered himself, he would not be punished.

The priest came and related to the *nambardar* how the blind beggar had made a fool of him and had taken away his money. He also told him how he and his wife had chalked out a plan to get the money back and to teach the blind beggar a lesson. The *nambardar* was much impressed by the priest's intelligence. He called a meeting of the elders of the village and named the priest as his successor, whilst he threw the three blind brothers into prison.

21

THE WISE ADVICE

ONCE, a long time ago, a king of Kashmir became the devoted follower of a *rishi*.[1] The king who had but lately ascended the throne, ordered a modest but comfortable house to be erected for the *rishi* near the gold-domed palace-temple known as *Maharaj-ka-mandir*. The temple had through the ages been the temple for the kings of Kashmir and for their families.

A house was accordingly built and the king went there each evening to pay his respects and to listen to the wise words of the *rishi*. One evening, however when he called on the *rishi* as usual, he found him in a very depressed mood. There were tears in his eyes. The king was shocked. 'What is the matter ?' The *rishi* then said: 'Evil, my son, evil is in the wind and there is danger all around you. The courtiers who surround you day and night, have conspired and plotted against you. They plan to assassinate you in a few days. Leave the palace in disguise immediately. Carry with you as much money and valuables as you can and slip away unobserved. But before you go, take this paper. Gems of advice are written down on it. They will prove invaluable gems to you in your wandering through unknown lands and unknown people. Take the paper and hasten out of the palace and the capital. God's blessings be with you.'

1. A holy man.

The king thanked the *rishi* and went back to the palace. He dressed himself as a traveller. He wore an ordinary *pheran*.[1] On his feet he wore a pair of *tsaplis*.[2] The *pheran* was made of coarse cloth. He put the diamonds and other valuables in a cloth bag and this he stitched into the folds of his *pheran*. The gold coins he put in a bag which he carried in his hand.

In the stillness of the night, he slipped out of the palace from the eastern side along which flowed the Jhelum river. He walked quickly along its banks. After he had gone some distance, he took out the paper the holy man had given to him. It read: 'Son, you will be going to strange lands and will meet strange people. Do not trust anyone or anything in these lands. Remember we can only trust our friends who stand by us even in our adversity. Even relations disown us when times are bad.'

The king memorised every word of it and put the paper safely away. He had walked a long distance and the morning sun found him far from the capital. Dawn was breaking through and the valley lay before him. The landscape was full of colour. The king could not but stop to gaze and marvel at what he saw. Before him lay sheets of pale pink and white almond blossom. Its petals lay sprinkled on the crisp green grass. Beyond these could be seen the snowy white of the flowering apricot trees and the pink blossoms of the peach trees. In another part of the valley stretched the brilliant blazing yellow of the mustard flowers. The birds were awakening and the air was vibrant with their songs. The king heaved a deep sigh of satisfaction and murmured, '*Kashmir benuzir, Kashmir zannat puzir*' (Kashmir is without an equal, Kashmir is equal to Paradise).

1. A long coat.
2. Leather sandals.

He was tired and longed to rest. He stopped by a wayside stall and thirstily drank the *shiri*[1] which the shopkeeper offered. He could hardly keep his eyes open. 'I must rest awhile,' he decided and so seeking a secluded spot, he lay down to sleep.

After a most refreshing sleep, he took the road leading away from the capital. Throughout the day he walked and had walked through half the night when he saw a welcoming light peeping out from under an inn door. The king surveyed the house. It was a two-storeyed wooden house. In common with the other houses in Kashmir, the second storey had a front verandah with eight steps leading to it and to the rooms at the top. The room on the ground floor seemed to be full of cattle and sheep, for he could hear them mooing and bleating.

The tired king decided to spend a few hours here before he went any further. He climbed the rickety steps and gently knocked on the door. It was almost immediately opened by an old woman. The first thought of the king on seeing her was to turn his back and take to the road, for never had he seen a more evil looking woman. She smiled broadly and invited him to spend the night in her modest inn. He accepted the invitation and was led to a room. It was a dingy one but the bed had been freshly made. A clean white sheet was spread on it and did indeed look most inviting, but he remembered the warning of the holy man and resisted from flinging himself on it. Instead he ordered a hot meal. When the old woman left, he quickly bolted the door, picked up the bedsheet and looked under it. He saw a soft mattress on a wooden bedstead. He then peeped under the bed. He saw a dark, deep ditch. The bed had been so placed that if anyone sat on it, it would immediately sink into the ditch. The king was filled with rage. Taking out

1. Saltish tea.

his dagger, he rushed at the evil woman and killed her. He then left the inn and went his way.

After walking for nearly two days, he arrived at a town. Here lived one of his boyhood friends. As soon as the friend heard that the king was passing through the town, he hurried to the king's presence. He could barely recognise the king in his coarse *pheran* and worn-out *tsaplis*. Without wasting time on questions, he persuaded the king to spend a few days with him. He administered to all his needs with the greatest love and care. The two friends recalled their boyhood days and spent merry months together. At the end of the third month, the king took leave of his friend, saying 'I shall go to the neighbouring kingdom to seek the king's help to get back my throne.' The friend gave him a fleet horse, 'It will carry you safely to your destination.' But the king would not hear of it and left.

In the next village lived one of his uncles. The king after a tiring walk decided to rest at his house for a while; but when the uncle saw the worn-out appearance of the king, he completely disowned him. The king was deeply hurt and realised how wisely the old man had spoken. He soon reached the neighbouring kingdom. Here a large army was placed at his disposal and with the help of this, the king returned to Kashmir and defeated the rebel courtiers. He once more ascended the throne and ordered a memorial to be built in memory of the wise *rishi*, who had died in the king's absence.

22

THE KING OF KASHMIR

THE story is about the time when Kashmir had a Buddhist king. The capital was a beautiful city with an impressive row of houses, each one surrounded by gardens in which bloomed the exotic flowers of the valley. Walnut trees shaded the roads and apple and peach blossoms coloured the skyline. The king was a devout Buddhist and the domes of the Buddhist monasteries and *viharas* or temples could be spotted over the roof-tops. The king was pious and kind and *Khairas tajil ta nya yas tatil*, swift to do good and slow to do evil. The subjects too adopted the religion of their king. He was to them both a teacher and a father. But there were some who not only refused to change their religion, but they also looked down scornfully at the new converts. Among this group was a minister's son. The minister was a Buddhist but the son shunned the religion and threatened to leave hearth and home because of his father's conversion. The father tried his utmost to explain things to the boy but to no avail.

'My son,' the father would say, 'do not speak ill of Buddhism just because your father believes in it. All religions teach good works and just as the Brahmins teach goodness and truth so also does Buddhism teach kindness, gentleness and charity in thought and deed.'

It was of no use. The son refused to listen. At last the father carried his tale of woe to the king.

He said, 'Sire, he is my only son. If he leaves me and goes away what will become of me ?'

The king replied, 'Leave your son in my care. I will help him to see the "light".' He then ordered two of his men, 'Arrest my minister's son and bring him here. Say that I have ordered him to be hanged.'

The son was frightened out of his wits when he heard the sentence of the king. He came and fell at the feet of the king, begging for mercy. The father too fell at the king's feet. He had not imagined that 'seeing the light' would mean death for the boy. The king said sternly to the minister, 'Take the boy home and see that he mends his ways. In a month's time I will reconsider the sentence.'

The father and son went home. The son was alarmed and bewildered. What crime had he committed that the king should punish him to death ? Though he thought about it day and night, he could not think of any such crime of which he could be accused. At the end of the month, he went once again with his father to the king. He fell at the king's feet and asked, 'Sire, I demand to know why you have condemned me to death. What have I done ? The fear of my impending death has so frightened me that I have not been able to sleep for the last thirty days.'

'Good,' said the king, 'It was a lesson to teach you the fear of death, a fear that makes one lose one's reason. That being so, why should not one turn to a religion which seeks to release one from it ? Buddhism undertakes to do this, so why blame your father because he believes in it and follows its teachings ?'

The youth understood the king's words and said, 'Sire, I offer my humble thanks for this great

lesson. I wish to know more about this great religion.'

The king was eager to teach it to him and ordered the youth to be housed in the royal guest house. One evening the king called him and giving him a lighted oil lamp said, 'Carry this lamp to your father's house at the other end of the town and then return with it, but in the process you must be very careful and see that the strong breeze that is blowing, does not blow out the light. If that happens you shall be hanged.'

The frightened youth took the lighted lamp and a strong gust of wind nearly blew it off. He hurriedly shaded it with his right hand and left the palace. Two royal guards followed him close behind to see that he carried out the king's orders. With their swords drawn out, they marched menacingly behind him. The three went through the streets and lanes of the capital. The breeze became a bit stronger and the youth could hardly breathe as he



walked. When the minister saw his son, he rushed out to greet him but the son cried out, 'Father do not touch me. If this lamp blows out I shall lose my life. Allow me to return to the palace,' and thus taking leave of his father, the youth in great terror, carried the lamp back to the palace. The king was pleased to see the lighted lamp. He asked the boy, 'Whom did you meet on the way ?' "

'Sire,' said the boy, heaving deep sighs of relief, "I was so frightened of the lamp blowing out and thus inviting death that I kept my eyes fixed on the lamp and neither saw nor heard anyone."

The king smiled at the reply and said, 'This was a lesson of concentration for you. It was meant to teach you that if you put your mind completely on a thing, you become unaware of the world around you. Buddhism teaches that if you concentrate on the highest good, you become unconscious of the world and its sorrows and thus see the truth. Having seen the truth, you are freed from the cycle of births and rebirths. What you have learnt today is a simple lesson on how to concentrate.'

The youth marvelled at the king's effective manner of teaching. He profusely thanked the king and returned home to his father a changed man and a believer in Buddhism.

23

THE REVENGE

IN ancient Kashmir, the Pir Panjal route was a popular one. This was so because it was the salt route by which salt was brought into the valley from Punjab. Though the forests still spread far and wide all along this route, a number of villages also sprang up. One such village was Rajapuri, now known as Rajaori. Here lived four brothers with their one and only sister. There was great love between them but the dearest to all was the girl. She was as pretty as she was good. She dearly loved her brothers and was willing to listen to all their confusing orders. The boys, though they fought and quarrelled amongst themselves as all boys do, had never a harsh word for their sister. They were content with whatever she did for them.

As the years passed by, the brothers married. Four brides came to the house and it hubbubed with life. For a short while all went well, but when the wives saw the great love their husbands bore for the sister, they became jealous. They would grow indignant when their husbands fulfilled her slightest wish, often ignoring what they, the wives, had said. And as the days passed, their jealousy turned into hatred. They made her do all the heavy chores. Of course they were careful to see that their husbands were well out of the house before they piled her with work. Then one would order, 'Sweep the floor'; the second, 'Wash the utensils'; the third would say harshly, 'What a lazy girl you are. See

all the clothes still to be washed. Off with them and be careful to wash them sparkling clean'; and lastly the fourth wife, 'Cook the food.'

The poor girl ran to and fro trying to please all and only succeeding in making a greater mess of everything. For this she was scolded all over again and if she dared to weep, more orders were heaped on her. She felt she was in an awful fix, but she saw no way out of it. The only respite was when her brothers returned from work. About half an hour before that, she was huddled off to the bath-room. After a refreshing bath and a change of clothes, she was allowed to await their arrival. She had one great quality which even her sisters-in-law grudgingly acknowledged and that was she never complained to her brothers. She always greeted them with a smiling face and had an affectionate word for each one of them. And thus, though there was so much unhappiness in her little heart, there was peace in the house.

Once the brothers had to go on a long journey for a few days. The wives snatched this opportunity to make the girl more miserable. They pointed to a stack of hay and said, 'Your eldest brother lost his ring in that hay stack. Seek it out and give it to us.' With this they went off. The girl looked at the big stack of hay, nearly twice her height. How could she find a ring lost in there ? She burst into tears at the thought and wept bitterly. Suddenly she heard the squeaking of a rat and felt something tugging her right foot. Looking down she saw a big rat. It seemed to give her a reassuring smile and then it dived into the stack of hay. Before the afternoon was out, the rat covered with hay. crawled out and laid the lost ring at her feet. Then it disappeared into its hole. Very much relieved, the girl returned the ring to her eldest sister-in-law.

The next day the wives pointed to a heap of

grain and said, 'Separate the good grain from the bad and store the good portion in the wooden granary.'

The girl looked at the huge heap of grain in front of her and promptly burst into tears. Suddenly she saw two twittering sparrows fly down and start to peck at the grain. At first she was alarmed, for she thought that they were eating it, but on closer examination she found that they were expertly separating the good grain from the bad. When the work was done, they flew away and the girl stored the good grain in the granary. The sisters-in-law were rather displeased as they could not find any fault with her work.

On the third day they could think of no new work to give to the girl and so she spent a restful day. But on the fourth day she was given a cup and told, 'In the forest, on the eastern side of the town, lives a hermit. Go to him and ask him to give you the juice of the medicinal herb which he gives to others. Remember to come home before the day is out.'

She was to return before the day was out because her brothers were expected home that evening. The girl took her cup and left home. Her little frame was seething with anger. Her sisters-in-law had treated her outrageously, she felt, and she wished she could think of a way to get out of her misery. With her little mind working fast, she walked towards the forest. On entering it she did not go to the hermit's hut. On the contrary she sought out a reddish looking herb, crushed out the juice and filled the cup with this. Then she turned homewards. She had just left the forest when she saw her brothers coming. She gave them her brightest smile as she greeted them. The brothers on the other hand were astonished to see her in a deserted

and dangerous place. ' "Why have you come here?" ' they all demanded.

'Dear brothers,' said the girl sweetly. 'Your wives have eye trouble and are in great pain. They asked me to get this medicinal juice for them. I could not help coming.'

They all returned home. You can imagine the surprise and fright of the wives when they saw the sister with her brothers. What if the girl had told their husbands how they had treated her ? It was a relief to them to see that she had said no such thing, for the men greeted their wives and said, Our dear sister tells us that you have eye trouble and are in great pain. How is it now ? See she has brought the juice you had asked her to get: Lie down while she pours a few drops into each eye.'

What could the wives do. They pretended to be in great pain and asked the girl to drop a little of the juice in their eyes. She did so. Soon after this the wives really felt the pain. As the day passed, the pain grew worse. Nor was that all. They were sure that their eyesight was getting weak. Doctors were consulted but no one could prevent the wives from becoming totally blind. The wives went away to their parents' homes and never returned whilst the girl lived in peace with her brothers.